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THE DETECTIVE SAW THAT THE DOG WAS BOUND TO PROTECT THE INSENSIBLE
WOMAN, OR DIE IN HER DEFENSE.

OR,

A Fight with Foes from the Grave.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "OLD DOUBLEDARK," "CENTRAL
PACIFIC PAUL," "DEEP DUKE," "HOT
HEART," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE DETECTIVE'S SECRET CASE.

Two men crouched in ambush. The leaves of a thicket concealed them from view, and the gathering shades of evening made the road a fit place for crime. It was the heart of a swamp. Through this ran the road—one not traveled to any great extent, yet one where a rider or pedestrian was liable to be seen at any time.

Plainly, the men in ambush were waiting for some particular person, for they watched the southern part of the road constantly.

If the light of day had been turned upon them it would have been seen that they were evil-looking fellows. One was a white man, large of stature, rough of dress, coarse of face, and a typical brute in general appearance. His com-

panion was a good copy of himself, except that he was of a different color. He was a negro of the deepest shade.

Footsteps sounded on the road, and a man advanced with slow but firm steps.

The ambush men whispered to each other, and then, as the stranger came opposite their covert, sprung out and confronted him. Each was armed with a club, and they flourished them in the face of the man they had so rudely stopped.

"Your money!" growled the white leader.

"Hand it over or you are a dead man!"

The person so rudely addressed stood still and surveyed them with composure not to have been expected.

"Upon my word!" he returned, "you take a polite way of asking a favor."

"No talk! Fork over!" was the reply.

"I think I know you, men. I've heard of Drake Hodge and Black Tuck, and you seem to fit the bill."

"Don't yer worry as ter who we be. You know what we want, an' that's enough. Hand over yer money."

"Yah!" added the negro, with a thick growl; "hand over, or die!"

"See here, you two, do you want to get a life-job in prison?" demanded the accosted men.

"You see yer!" retorted Drake Hodge.

"You make no talk, all right; but ef you hang off, down you go. Yer money we will hev. Hear that? The only question is, shall we leave you safe, or with a broken head?"

"So you intend to do me harm?"

"We'll pound yer inter nothin' ef you resist. Yes; an' won't waste no more words. Give us yer money now, or down yer go!"

Hodge flourished his club, and his intentions were quite as bad as his words. The man they had halted was well along in years, and not a match for either of them in a fight. He exhibited the coolness of a man thoroughly brave, but something more than this was necessary to defeat them. Fortunately, the something additional was not lacking.

Just as Hodge was about to use his club he was amazed and alarmed by a blow upon his own head, and as he reeled under its force it was followed by other blows, and a keen, sharp voice rung in his ears:

"So you want some clubbing done, do you? Well, have your fill! Take this! and this!"

A shower of lusty strokes overwhelmed the fellow, and, as he tried in vain to ward them off, Black Tuck sprung forward, only to receive a share of the punishment. The new-comer was armed with a long stick, and he used it with such will and quickness that they were helpless before him.

Both Hodge and Tuck were cowards at heart, and, when they saw the fight going against them so completely, all their resolution gave way. Hodge sounded the cry, and they turned, sprung into the bushes, and were heard crashing and floundering away.

Rescued man and rescuer clasped hands.

"So it's you, my boy?" cried the former. "By Neptune! you came just in time; those rascals would have made a wreck of me."

"I take it they were robbers?"

"What else could you expect of Drake Hodge and Black Tuck?"

"So you know them?"

"By reputation. Don't you?"

"No."

"They are veritable outlaws. Hodge is a criminal who, owing to lax laws, or, rather, lax execution of the law, has kept out of prison many years after he ought to have been a life-convict. Black Tuck was a slave, but, being flogged for his undoubted sins, he took to the swamps. He and Hodge hunt in company, and are the terrors of this part of Virginia. All efforts to catch them have failed. They know the swamps as no one else does, and, hiding there when necessary, sally forth when they see fit, to plunder honest folks. There's a detective job for you, my boy!"

"I have more important work."

"True, true. How goes it?"

"Well, I am safely domiciled at Thornholm Lodge as innocent Walter Vincent, the secretary."

"And nobody suspects that you are Dangerous Dave, the Never-Beaten Detective, eh?"

"Softly, captain! Don't speak those words here."

"Excuse me! Old Ned Norcross is no strategist. Give me a ship on the wave and I am all right, but I want things square and above-board."

"I know your way, captain. Well, fate made me a detective, but I hope to get out of the business soon. They call me"—the speaker looked around carefully and lowered his voice—"the Never-Beaten Detective. Shall I maintain my right to the title? After working for other men, I am, at last, engaged for myself, and life itself is not dearer than the hopes I have at stake. But you know it all; let me not dwell upon it."

"I know, my boy, and my heart-felt sympathy is yours. But how do you find things at Thornholm Lodge?"

"I dare say it is a typical Virginia plantation. Once, it was about as grand as any in the

country, but it shows signs of decay in this, the year 1852. Roland Thornholm is no manager."

"That's widely known. But tell me what has happened to you?"

"You shall hear the whole story, but come to a safer place; this is not a fit place to talk, and, besides, our swamp outlaws may creep up and renew their attack."

The couple walked on.

If daylight had prevailed, to reveal them strongly, it would have been seen that Captain Norcross was a fine-looking, white-bearded old gentleman, and that he who had answered to the peculiar name of "Dangerous Dave, the Never-Beaten Detective," was still less than thirty, and quite as good a specimen of youth as Norcross was of advanced years.

Finding a suitable place they sat down and the story began.

It was told in a glade in the woods, a little back from the road, and where no one was likely to interrupt them unless it was a wandering hunter.

The general locality was what had been the choicest country part of Virginia in ante-bellum days. Rich plantations abounded, the wealthy residents having an abundance of slaves, while "poor whites" fitted into the niches, as it were. The State was at the height of its glory, but it had all of the elements that went to make up Southern society, high and low.

The detective began his story.

"Before coming here I did all that was possible to sink my professional character and become an entirely different man. The advertisement of Roland Thornholm for a secretary was the chance of my life. I hastened here to secure the position."

"First of all I went to the hotel at Glenville, but rode over to the Lodge the next morning. I had never seen a place so grand before. The house was too big and rambling, but the grounds were perfect. I went in and saw Thornholm and Mr. Crapo. They were together in the library while I was meeting the former's questions."

"He asked as to my education and general fitness, and then surprised me by stating that he wanted more than a secretary; he wanted a schoolmaster!"

"He confessed that he had slighted books for dogs and guns, and was, as a consequence, wholly unlearned; but avowed that he wanted to make up for lost time."

"Why does he resume books at his age?" asked Captain Norcross, curiously.

"That is what I don't know. Edward Crapo listened with a sneer on his face. Clearly there is no love lost between them."

"Well, I was engaged as secretary—and schoolmaster—and started on my return to Glenville. As I am going to be very frank with you, I'll tell something that happened on the way."

"I had gone but a short distance along the road when a big dog suddenly rushed around a curve and, barking loudly, sprung at my horse in such a way that there was nearly an accident."

"Managing to avoid a fall, I was about to turn upon the dog in anger when the animal was followed by an equestrienne. I forgot my anger at once. She was the most beautiful young girl I had ever seen. She apologized for the dog's behavior; I answered her that it was all right; we separated."

"The dog was named Hector. Who his mistress was I did not learn, but I confess that I hoped we should meet again."

Captain Norcross smiled.

"I had thought you proof against beauty," he remarked, dryly.

"Wait!" the detective returned. "Hear the sequel. Going back to Glenville I reported the result to Parkley, the landlord. He had taken an interest in me, and he offered congratulations, but toned them down with the opinion that I would not like. He gave me a word-picture of each of the chief persons at the Lodge."

"Roland, he said, was an ignorant barbarian who cared only for the hunt and the chase; a coarse, rude, selfish fellow, whom no one liked. Edward Crapo, and Mrs. Crapo, he represented as proud, cold, conceited upstarts."

"And Veva Crapo?" questioned Norcross.

"He spoke well of her; said she was all that was good and noble, and was adored by rich and poor, alike. To the one she was a charming companion; to the other, a helper with time and money."

"The next forenoon I went to the Lodge to begin work. It was late, but Roland was not up. Crapo observed, with a cold sneer, that he seldom rose before noon. That was precisely what he did do on that occasion, and, when he finally appeared, he declared that he did not feel like study, so he took his horse and dog and went for a ride."

"As for me, I wandered through the grounds back of the old house, and had an encounter. I came upon the big dog, Hector, and—Hector's mistress. Can you guess the sequel?"

"Did she prove to be Veva Crapo?"

"Yes. I had never surmised the truth, and the discovery was unpleasant. Captain, if I

succeed at Thornholm Lodge, I shall bring sorrow to her!"

"Do you think of giving it up?"

"I cannot; I must go on."

"Right, my boy; right!"

"Yet—"

The detective paused and shook his head gloomily.

"She must have some of the Crapo meanness," suggested Norcross.

"She seems to have none. They are proud, stiff, cold and arrogant; she is as friendly with me as if I were an equal."

"She sees that you are an equal!" the old captain declared. "You may be Dangerous Dave, detective, or Walter Vincent, secretary; but your manhood shows like the sun through a fog."

"Let it pass. I am domiciled at Thornholm, and the work must go on. Little did I suspect, when I entered upon the calling of a detective, that I should ever be engaged in a case like this. Money does not influence me now, yet it is a greater and grander game than I have ever before played. Little do the people at the Lodge suspect that they have allowed a deadly enemy to come into their very household!"

"They deserve their fate."

"I have not won, yet."

"But you will."

"We shall see."

"You've been there two days, now, eh?"

"Yes, and no lessons have been given Roland Thornholm yet. Plainly, the mere thought of them is torture to him, and he flies to his dog and horse for relief, and goes galloping across the fields."

"Why can he want to take to books?"

"I don't know. It is a secret motive. Edward Crapo knows what it is, and mention, or thought, of study on Roland's part brings a sneer to the old man's face—often, too, in words, to his lips. He don't hesitate to irritate the younger man."

"He's reckless, isn't he?"

"It would seem so. The first Mrs. Crapo had a life-lease on the Lodge, but neither Edward nor his present wife has any claim. Roland could turn them into the street any hour, if he saw fit. Crapo is next to a beggar, yet he seems to feel no fear."

"Singular!"

"Yes. But, captain, time flies; we must part. Are they all well at the house?"

"Yes."

"I'll see you all, soon. Just now, the Lodge is all rent from parlor to kitchen over Roland's approaching birthday party. I want to be around, then, to watch the nabobs arrive; after that, I'll run down and see you."

They arose and Vincent extended his hand.

"Look out for yourself," Norcross cautioned.

"Roland would kill you, if he knew all."

"Of that I am well aware, but he does not know it. I don't intend he shall until he is ruined!"

CHAPTER II.

AN ENEMY IN THE HOUSE.

THORNHOLM LODGE, as has already been indicated, was one of the finest of country residences in Virginia, and had been in the possession of the family for several generations.

When, in 1832, Robert Allan Thornholm died, he would have left no one to bear the old name had it not been a stipulation of his will that his grandson, Roland Thornholm Crapo, then a mere child, should assume the name and the heritage at one and the same time. The elder man had seen but one of his children, a daughter, reach maturity, and Roland was the offspring of her marriage to Edward Crapo.

A score of years had seen many changes at the lodge, and the old slaves related how Crapo's wife had died soon after her father; how her husband had married a second time and, by that union, became the father of a second child, a daughter; and how Roland Thornholm had passed through his childhood and youth as the sole possessor of the family riches, his relatives being there only by tolerance.

Crapo and his wife, however, were as proud as though they owned one-half of Virginia, and, thus far, Roland had never had any trouble with them.

The coming of the secretary, Walter Vincent, appeared to be a trivial matter, or would have been so regarded if it had not thrown the labor of study upon Roland.

Study the latter certainly needed, for he was rude, boorish and ignorant to an unusual degree, but he took to it as one does to unpalatable medicine.

For some strange reason he wished to learn, but he hated the process most earnestly. He was sensitive on the subject, too.

While his father, Edward Crapo, certainly knew of it, and of the motive which prompted it, Roland was earnest in his repeated injunctions to Vincent not to let any one know the truth. People were to suppose the "secretary" was there simply as a letter-writer and accountant, while the schoolmaster part was to be an utter secret.

But, while Roland was scheming to keep others in ignorance, there were secrets of which

he was ignorant, and the presence of Vincent at the Lodge meant far more than he suspected.

When the so-called secretary returned to the house he retired like an innocent and peaceable man, but did not pass a night of unbroken slumber.

The clock had just struck three when the door of the room devoted to his private use was opened and he appeared at the threshold. He was clad as during the day, and held a lamp in one hand.

Pausing only to see that he was unobserved, he then moved softly along the hall until he reached a bolted door at the further end. This bolt he tried to push back, but the rust of years held it firmly until several attempts had been made.

When it at last gave way he passed through and closed the door behind him. The light of the lamp revealed a narrow, dingy hall, where cobwebs and dust held sway, but he was not surprised. This was the older part of the Lodge, and years had passed since it had been occupied—perhaps since it had been visited.

Pausing but for a moment he went forward, and opening another door, entered a room of considerable size. From this opened other doors, but he had arrived at his destination.

He looked about with marked interest. A carpet of rich material covered the floor, but Time had touched it heavily, and it was old-fashioned, faded, dust-covered. The antique furniture remained, and around the walls hung a line of portraits, many of them over a hundred years old, and by the painters of England.

The eyes of each pictured face seemed to the intruder to turn upon him, and he bowed his head with an air like one among the dead.

Arousing after a pause he directed his gaze toward a cabinet which stood in one corner. It was of ancient, clumsy style, but he advanced with quicker steps than if it had been a wonder of modern make.

For some time he looked it over critically, and then set down his lamp and opened one of the drawers. It contained a quantity of old newspapers, the dates of which were many years previous, but nothing more.

A similar result followed with the others, but he did not seem discouraged. The lower drawer remained open, and he began to run his hand carefully along the edges.

For some time nothing rewarded him, but finally one half of the lower board slid back under the other half, and a second, secret drawer was revealed below.

A score of folded papers met his gaze, and he drew them out quickly, unfolding and glancing at each. Every one was of value to the Thornholm family, but none satisfied Vincent. After one glance each was tossed aside impatiently until the last was in his hand.

Raising his gaze, he paused for a moment. "It is the last chance!" he muttered. "Should this prove as useless as the others, my hopes are dashed to the ground. Let me see!"

He opened the paper quickly, glanced at it once, and then cast it aside.

"Baffled!" he added, gloomily. "I have worked, planned and hoped in vain. The paper I so ardently desired is not here—doubtless it has been in ashes for nearly a score of years. I almost wish I had not come to Thornholm Lodge. But, no, no; I will not be discouraged; I will begin anew and get light in some way. Justice is bound to triumph in the end. These papers are of no use; I will replace them and return to my own chamber, there to scheme anew."

He restored the drawer to its former condition with great care, and then rose to leave the room.

But again the eyes of the pictured faces appeared to turn upon him!

To him they had a deep solemnity, but it was not mixed with any superstitious shrinking. He advanced to the wall and began to examine the various pictures. They were all that remained of generation after generation of the Thornholms, gallant men and beautiful women, and were faces worth examination and study.

At last he reached one which was that of a young lady, and so beautiful that his eyes kindled with admiration. Surveying it in detail, his gaze fell upon a name painted at the bottom:

"ROSALIND!"

It was not an uncommon name, but, at the sight, Walter Vincent uttered a cry, his face changed color, and the lamp nearly fell from his hand.

Awhile he gazed at the picture, and then, as if moved by a power he could not resist, he fell upon his knees, clasped his hands and bowed his head before the likeness of the dead. His lips moved, but no audible words gave clew to his thoughts.

Minutes passed before Vincent raised his head. When he did, the former impression that the pictured eyes were regarding him with intelligence was stronger than ever; he could almost have believed that he saw a smile upon the face.

Beautiful, indeed, must have been the original, and Vincent gazed like one entranced. The well-rounded form, bright eyes, rosy cheeks, and spirited, but kind, expression were very effective.

Very like the Thornholms she had been, too, yet the secretary had shown no great interest in any other picture.

A strange sight it would have been had one of the family seen their salaried man thus standing fascinated in the old portrait-hall, and it was well for him that no one appeared.

He aroused with a start, at last, and with a lingering farewell look at the picture, went to the door by which he had entered.

"Enough for to-night," he murmured. "No discoveries await me here, it seems. I should despair if— But, patience, patience! In my past detective work I have been called Dangerous Dave, because my pertinacity made guilty persons unsafe. Shall I be less resolute, now, when my own interests are at stake? No! I'll go on; I'll win if I can!"

He passed out of the room, again bolted the door, and returned to his own chamber.

The other inmates of the Lodge slept on, little suspecting how the mysterious secretary was passing his time.

CHAPTER III.

A QUESTION ASKED TOO LATE.

ROLAND THORNHOLM went to work upon his studies with the clumsy manner of one of his pet dogs, his brain being about as unwieldy as the big canines that accompanied him in the chase.

His case was not hopeless, for, rough as he was, he was not devoid of a kind of brightness, and, though Walter Vincent found a very uncultivated field in his employer's mind, he knew there would be some improvement if Roland kept on.

But Roland had his mind full of other thoughts. His horses, dogs and guns could not be slighted, he thought; and the approaching birthday party took up what little time was left.

The latter momentous occasion arrived. Soon after noon the invited guests began to come in their carriages. Vincent sat at an upper window, and an aged slave, who had taken a fancy to him, stood by his side and commented on each arrival.

"Dat air am Cap'n Hereford," he announced, at one point. "He went down to Texico, or some sech place, an' f'it against de Mexans. He am a drefull brave man."

"He has a fine, soldierly figure, and handsome, manly face. Who is in the next carriage?"

"That am John Jay Lennox, a gemman as rich as de cap'n, or my own master; but I don't like him. They do say, though, dat he wants fer ter marry Miss Veva."

"Do they?" returned Vincent, smiling. "Probably that is an error. I believe that when she chooses a husband, it will not be an effeminate dandy."

"Hi! you see dat lady jest 'lightin'?"

"Yes; and she is remarkably handsome."

"Dat am Miss Berenice Royalston, de daughter ob one ob de richest men around hyar; de bosom frien' ob Miss Veva, an' de 'fianced wife ob Massa Roland. He's right lucky ter get her."

"Rather!" Vincent agreed, dryly.

Other guests were introduced to his attention in like way, but he tired of it, at last, and, going to the library, found as much pleasure in the company of the books as if he had been among the favored merry-makers. Yet, it appeared that his thoughts wandered, for, once, he raised his head with the remark:

"Nonsense! She would not be so foolish!"

He had been thinking what the old slave said about Veva and John Jay Lennox.

Somewhat later he went to the window. The guests were grouped in the grounds in parties of varying size, or moving about, and at one point he saw Captain Hereford and Berenice Royalston walking side by side.

Vincent was an observing man, and, after watching them for a moment, he shrugged his shoulders and muttered:

"My advice to noble Roland Thornholm is that he looks well to his affianced wife, if, indeed, Miss Royalston has that doubtful honor. She and her present companion seem to be suspiciously good friends. What if Roland should lose her?"

They certainly made a fine-looking couple as they moved along the tree-bordered walk. Hereford was tall, strong, of soldierly carriage, and manly and refined in all ways. Miss Royalston lost nothing in such company, for she was, indeed, a rarely beautiful woman, and had all the graces of high breeding.

Vincent had not incorrectly read Hereford's manner, and, when the latter skillfully drew Berenice away from the other guests, he had a fixed purpose in view.

He had never heard that she was engaged to Roland Thornholm, and he intended to place his own fate in her hands as frankly as an honest man might.

At the extremity of the grounds he found a rustic seat where they could sit down, and, after assuring himself that they were alone, he approached the subject.

He was a soldier, and there was a trace of military abruptness in the way he made the proposal; but words did not fail him. In eager tones and strong words he told the story of his

love, and, as he expressed it, cast himself upon her mercy.

Little did he suspect how his declaration would be received.

As soon as Berenice understood its purport, she had grown agitated, and, once, had extended her hand in a vain attempt to stop him. Unknown to him she had tried to interrupt in some other way, but speech had failed her in the crisis.

She was the victim of deepest emotion. Suspecting nothing, Hereford looked to her for his answer, but, even in her face, he read something which chilled him.

She seemed more than confused; her agitation even partook of terror.

"Forbear, Arthur, forbear!" she gasped.

The captain regarded her in consternation. Refusal he had thought possible, but what meant such profound distress?

"Forbear?" he repeated, mechanically.

"Yes, and—have mercy!"

Hereford moved restlessly.

"I don't understand!" he returned. "In what way have I been unmerciful?"

Berenice had seemed about to give way to tears, but the last words aroused her.

"Not that!" she cried. "I did not know what I said. You are more than merciful; you are noble and kind, but I cannot be your wife!"

"Why?"

The single word escaped Hereford's lips almost peremptorily.

"I am to be the wife of Roland Thornholm!"

She spoke brokenly, but he understood not only the words but their import, and he saw his dreams of the future float away like mere air.

"Thornholm's wife!"

"Yes; we have been betrothed for a month, and the engagement was to be—is to be—made public this evening."

"I did not suspect this."

"Yet, it is true."

"And I have spoken too late?"

"Too late!"

There was an emphasis on the words; an inflection which did not escape his notice; and he looked at her more keenly. He had seen Thornholm assist her from her carriage that day, and could almost have sworn that she disliked to have his hand touch her own.

All this recurred to him, and, as he observed her present look, a strong suspicion crossed his mind.

"Pardon me, Berenice, but I have thought, at times, that you cared for me."

She was conscious of his close scrutiny, although she turned her head away, and he could see her tremble. He could not restrain the words which rose to his lips, though aware that it might not be manly to thus address the pledged wife of another.

"Have I no place in your affections?" he added.

"Yes, yes; oh! yes!" she cried, quickly.

"Then what is my place, if you are betrothed to Thornholm?" he added, venturing to take her hand.

She averted her face, but did not answer. Her emotion remained very perceptible, however, and Hereford was puzzled.

"Tell me the truth," he urged, eagerly; "do you love me?"

Quickly, impulsively came the answer.

"I do, I do; more than I love my own life!"

"Then why, in Heaven's name, are you the betrothed of Thornholm?—why have you placed this barrier between us?"

The soldier's voice was thrilling and intense, but its very vehemence and power brought Berenice back to prudence. She suddenly started to her feet.

"What did I say?" she gasped, like one terrified. "I did not intend to speak; I did not know what I said. Oh! Arthur, forget it; forget all, except that we are friends—and that I am to marry Roland Thornholm."

"It must not, shall not be!" Hereford cried, almost fiercely. "You have confessed your love for me, so you cannot love Thornholm. Such a marriage would be a sin, and you shall not make it. Remember you are a Royalston!"

"Stop! stop!" she returned, tremulously. "It is for you to remember I am not free to hear such words."

"But, Berenice, why did you pledge yourself to him, while loving me?"

"Because—oh! Heaven, I was mad, desperate! Because my heart was wrung to its center."

"How, and by whom?"

"I cannot tell."

"Was it Thornholm's work?"

"No, no; he had no part in the affair. I looked to myself, alone."

"I am wholly in the dark; I am perplexed and confused. Berenice, what secret is this which bids fair to darken both our lives?"

She was about to answer, though her manner gave Hereford no hope, when footsteps sounded on the graveled walk, and, looking up, they saw Roland Thornholm approaching.

There are some persons who have the faculty of rallying from deep emotion with singular quickness, and of appearing composed immediately after. Such was the case with Berenice and the captain. Seeing danger ahead, they

crushed back all the tell-tale signs and grew calm to an admirable degree.

Roland had seized a few minutes away from his duties as host to seek his betrothed. When he first saw her with Hereford he experienced a degree of jealousy, but the manner of the couple put him at ease.

During the unimportant conversation which followed the captain was polite and natural, and Berenice, smiling lightly, was even brilliant at times.

Hereford, however, was in a miserable frame of mind.

In a short time they were joined by Veva Crapo and John Jay Lennox. The former looked relieved at having her escort partially off her hands, but Mr. Lennox had never been in better spirits.

He was a weak man, physically and mentally. He had an effeminate face, wore an eye glass, and would have been the object of many slights had he not, fortunately for himself, been a man of wealth.

As such he had plenty of so-called friends and a larger array of flatterers.

After some further conversation all the party went to the house, and Veva embraced the chance to convey Berenice to her room.

"I'm just as happy as I can be!" Veva declared, confidentially, "for the long-expected evening has arrived at last. To-night your engagement to Roland will be announced, and another step will have been taken to make us sisters in fact as we have long been at heart. Roland has done one sensible thing, at least, by choosing you. Oh! I shall lose my wits when you come here to reign as mistress of the Lodge!"

"I fear we shall live together but a few months, if Mr. Lennox continues so devoted to you."

"Oh, nonsense! I hope you don't think I would marry him! He is so shallow his society is perfect misery to me. But I suppose you can't see it, in your own happiness."

It was a loving supplement to her remarks, but Berenice turned away to hide her own look of bitter sorrow.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DETECTIVE'S STRONG HAND.

In another room Captain Hereford was nervously pacing the floor. He had been interrupted in his interview with Berenice, and it seemed to him that his whole future depended upon seeing her again before the hateful engagement could be announced.

The chance at last arrived, for, soon after Berenice and Veva emerged from the latter's room, she was called away by business.

Hereford went quickly to Berenice's side.

"Is the announcement to be made to-night?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes."

The answer was prompt, but not firm, and she avoided his gaze.

"What are you about to do?" he demanded. "You have acknowledged that your heart is mine, yet you will go on and give your hand to Thornholm. Is this right? Is it just?"

She lifted her head quickly, and he saw her lips quiver.

"Do you think you suffer alone?" she asked, almost in a whisper. "Do you think I have no heart? Oh! Arthur, I am miserable, miserable!"

"Then why, why do you make this sacrifice?"

"I am betrothed to Roland."

"Engagements have been broken before, and may be broken again. I would not ask you to do anything not strictly honorable, but, surely, a woman can commit no greater wrong than to give her hand without her heart."

The last words seemed, to her, to have an unkind inflection.

"If I were wholly free, Arthur Hereford, I could never become your wife!" she declared, firmly.

"And yet you say you love me?"

"Forget those words—I asked you to forget them as a man of honor should! They were thoughtlessly spoken."

"Pardon me, Berenice, but I want to understand this. What is the secret which leads you along a path so strange? You smile on Roland; you have promised to marry him; yet you have no affection for him. You confess that you care for me, but add that, if you were free, you could never become my wife. Why is this? I think you owe an explanation to yourself, if not to me."

The soldier stood erect, his arms folded, his face full of powerful emotion, but Berenice did not look at him.

"I cannot!" she faltered.

"Cannot?"

"Do not ask me, for my lips are sealed. Whatever the secret, I shall carry it to my grave."

"Is it anything I have done?"

"Once more I say, do not ask me. From this time I have nothing to say, and I entreat you to be merciful. Do not take advantage of a woman's heart, but understand that your suit is utterly hopeless. We are to be friends—nothing more!"

At times, while these words were being spoken,

she had shown a dignity and firmness which told him how vain would be further appeal, and, though the last sentence again revealed her mental perturbation, he had no reply ready.

Before he could rally, Veva appeared close at hand, and Berenice hastened to join her.

Hereford was left confused, wretched and amazed.

What was he to make of such conduct?

He could not surmise the secret motive that actuated Berenice. He was, himself, of a noble and wealthy family; his record was untarnished; and he could see no motive for her course. It was rendered all the more strange because, having known her all his life, he was well aware that she was not one to be weak, uncertain or vacillating.

However, he could do no more than to endure it as patiently as possible. He could not control her actions, and, if she saw fit, she, with her highly intellectual and refined nature, could marry a man who cared for nothing higher than the pleasures springing from the company of horses and dogs.

Submit the captain must, but he could not do it gracefully.

He was a poor companion during the rest of the day and evening, and when, finally, the hateful engagement was publicly announced, it was well no one looked toward him.

While others smiled, he scowled darkly.

And when, later, others pressed forward to congratulate Berenice and Roland, his voice was not heard. He kept apart, and the dark look did not leave his face.

He was glad when the evening was ended, and was one of the first to leave Thornholm Lodge. He went without speech with Berenice.

In the meanwhile, one person was having the grounds back of the house all to himself. While festivities reigned within, Walter Vincent walked alone and smoked contentedly.

At times, he glanced toward the mansion with a cynical smile. He did not envy any one there, or feel resentment because he, as a salaried man, was barred out of the grand occasion.

On the contrary, he looked with contempt on the whole affair.

His past life had been such that he was not in love with the frivolities or amusements of the rich and fashionable part of mankind.

Only one thing there drew his thoughts. Veva Crapo appeared to belong to an entirely different order of human beings. He tried in vain to think of her with indifference. If, for a little while, he thought he had succeeded, her own bright face and kind words dispelled the delusion.

She was his only real associate in the mansion.

Roland, as has already been seen, gave only a few unwilling minutes to his studies, and then went off with his favorite horses and dogs; Edward Crapo passed his time in idling about the house and in talking politics in the club-house at Glenville; while Mrs. Crapo divided her life between calling upon her neighbors and languid endurance of life in her own room.

Thus it was that none of them was a companion for either Veva or Vincent, and that the latter two, having similar tastes, often met in the grounds and unknown to Veva's relatives, enjoyed long conversations.

She always treated the secretary as an equal; she was always kind, gracious and charming.

She had a strong influence upon him, though he tried to prevent it. He expected to bring trouble to her, and those most closely connected with her, in the future, and felt that he ought not to win her favorable opinion.

Good resolutions are more often made than adhered to, and the charm of her presence was so strong that he did not succeed in acting an indifferent part.

He saw that she appeared to enjoy his company and permitted it, even while accusing himself of all manner of baseness.

He could see the danger of which she was ignorant, yet he allowed her to go on blindly.

These accusing thoughts were in his mind when the carriage of the late guests were departing. The occasion was over, and he could soon return to his room with a prospect of peace, but he lingered to finish his cigar, and still paced the walk.

Ten minutes later other footsteps sounded. He looked up. Some one was approaching; a lady who wore a light white shawl over her shoulders; and he could not fail to recognize Veva.

He stopped, uncertain whether to meet or to avoid her.

The bushes rustled; a man sprung out and stood in her path.

"Hear we be, my pretty darlin'!" he growled. "Come! give us a kiss!"

Veva uttered a faint cry and turned to flee. A second man stood in her path. The first laughed in mocking triumph.

"Ha! ha! my darlin'!" he cried, "you can't run the gantlet. Give it up, an' say that you love us. Close up, comrade!"

Walter Vincent had been as much surprised as Veva, but he was not slow to recognize the men. They were Drake Hodge and Black Tuck, the swamp refugees, and, as usual, they were full of thoughts of mischief.

His blood boiled, metaphorically, at the idea that they should be so insolent as to molest Veva, and he sprung to her rescue with headlong haste.

Black Tuck was first in his path, and he felled that person with one well-directed blow. Then he seized Hodge and began to belabor him with energy and anger.

There were times when the swamp outlaw could fight with the fury of a cornered bear, but this was not one of them. He hated the wealthy planters, but feared them even more. His lawless instincts often led him to prowl around their grounds for purposes of plunder, but he rarely could be induced to stand his ground there when confronted with danger.

On this occasion he began to beg cravenly.

"Don't! don't! You'll mash my head in! You hurt! I ain't done nothin'. Come, now, don't! Let a feller be!"

A warning cry arose from Veva. Black Tuck had risen, drawn a knife and was creeping upon the young detective. The latter turned just in time. For a moment he was in danger, for he must meet the armed negro without a weapon, but his sudden turn dazed Tuck for a moment.

That was enough for Vincent.

He struck out in the effective way well known to him, and Tuck almost turned a back somersault as he went crashing into the bushes.

That was enough for the outlaws; as soon as the negro could arise, they bounded away in headlong haste. Vincent turned impulsively to Veva.

"Are you hurt?" he demanded.

"Oh, no."

"Thank heaven for that!"

There was more of fervency in his manner than he imagined, and Veva's voice was low and peculiar as she replied:

"Do you really think the safety of such an insignificant creature of importance?"

"Insignificant!"

The secretary spoke the word with emphasis, but the utterance was followed by a return to his usual prudence.

"We should quarrel over that word if you insisted upon it, but you ought to know that you are too important a feature of Thornholm Lodge life to apply it. One thing I must reprove you for—you have run into danger to-night."

"I was after a lost handkerchief, and did not dream that those horrible men would be near. Ugh! I suppose you know them well; they are the Ishmaels of this region."

"I've seen them before. Do they often come near here?"

"I never knew of their doing so before."

"Well, you have timely warning now, and I need not urge the need of future caution. Those fellows are fit companions for no one save the hangman."

CHAPTER V.

THE OLD SLAVE SPEAKS WORDS OF INTEREST.

VEVA'S lost handkerchief was found without great trouble by the side of one of the walks, and Vincent then escorted her to the mansion. She showed no haste to go inside, and, having fully recovered from her fright, talked pleasantly, but he would not have the interview prolonged.

He said good-night, but she delayed him until she could thank him again for saving her from the swamp outlaws.

He finally went away in a mood of irritation.

"Another unfortunate occurrence!" he thought.

"She is young, and this rescue will appeal to the romance that is in nearly every refined person at her age. I only hope she won't overdo it. As Walter Vincent I would not see her suffer; as Dangerous Dave, the Never-Beaten Detective, I am bound to wound her sorely, anon, and make her hate me. I must avoid her!"

It was a good resolution, but, the next morning, as he walked in the grounds, Veva descended upon him, radiant in beauty and bright of manner.

"I want to give you a new pleasure, Mr. Vincent!" she declared. "You see the negro quarters, yonder? Well, down in one of those cabins lives an old colored woman who has been a servant to the Thornholms for sixty-five years. She is still rugged except for a spinal disease caused by a fall, and is one of the best old souls living. We are great friends, and I often visit her, though she never ceases to regret that I am not a Thornholm. In her eyes, there is no other family equal to them on earth. Let me take you to her!"

A sudden, peculiar light leaped into Vincent's eyes, but he was calm again in a moment.

"Nothing would please me more," he returned, quietly.

They were soon at the cabin.

The place was simple, but superior to the other cabins. Its mistress sat in a big chair—a woman whose hair was as white as her face was dark. Plainly, she was of unmixed blood.

Vincent's first glance showed her to be a rather uncommon negress, however, for her features were regular and her expression surprisingly intelligent. She was gaudily dressed, and, at first sight, gave no indication of the infirmity which had crippled, but not emaciated, her.

Her eyes brightened at sight of Veva, and then flashed quickly to her companion.

"Phillis," explained Miss Crapo, "this is my brother's secretary, Mr. Vincent."

The woman was looking with strange intentness, and made no answer until the detective stepped forward and took her hand; but the sound of his voice in kindly words aroused her, and she smiled like herself.

"It's proper good for you-uns ter come an' see der old brack woman," she declared. "Miss Veva does so often, but she an' I is old friends."

"I hope you will add me to your list," Vincent answered, pleasantly. "I always had a fancy for elderly people, and I'm sure we would not quarrel."

"Ef you kin bear it, sah, I shall be glad to see you. I's an old woman, an' as I can't go nowbar without my crutch, I don't see many folks."

"You certainly shall see me," was the response.

For half an hour they remained, and he studied the negress carefully. She was talkative and jovial, strangely intelligent for one in her station, and devoted to the Thornholms.

All her life had been passed on the plantation in the service of the family, and its honor was as dear to her as though she had been more than a slave; but Vincent noticed that she made no mention of Roland, seeming to dwell on the past in preference to the present.

When her guests departed both promised to call again, but Phillis was surprised at the promptness with which Vincent kept his word.

It lacked an hour of sunset when he again entered, bringing some flowers; and this proof of thoughtfulness quite overwhelmed the aged woman.

In the conversation which followed, his affability and faculty of adapting himself to all grades of society still further impressed her.

"You ought ter have been borned a Thornholm!" she declared, at last, with emphasis. "You look jest like dem, an' talk like dem!"

"Yet, I can't even claim one drop of family blood in common with Roland," Vincent carelessly returned. "He is, I believe, the last of the Thornholms."

"Yes, sah; an' more's de pity. Dar was a time when dar was plenty of dem, but when de three sons of Massa Robert Allan Thornholm died, it left Miss Rosalind de last of de young generation."

"And she married Edward Crapo?"

"Yes, sah; an' Massa Roland am her son."

"Is he like his grandfather, this Robert Allan Thornholm of whom you speak?"

"Like him? Oh! no, sah; Massa Roland am very different, both in his looks an' his ways. You resemble de Thornholms more dan he does!"

"Indeed! Well, he does not seem much like Edward Crapo, either."

"Dey am alike in one way, an' that is—"

Phillis paused abruptly, but, as Vincent did not speak, slowly added:

"Neither is like de Thornholms."

"Was Crapo of as good birth as Miss Rosalind?" carelessly inquired the secretary.

"Was he? Wal, sah, ef you had heard ol' Massa Robert storm when de marriage was first made known to him you'd hab thought *not*! You see, sah, it was a secret marriage. Massa Crapo come to de neighborhood from—nobody knows whar—an' as he war den young, handsome an' dashin', my poor Miss Rosalind fell in love wid him, an' married him unknown to everybody."

"It was a case of mutual love, then?"

Vincent asked the question quietly, and appeared only moderately interested, but something—was it secret emotion—had flushed his cheeks.

"She loved him, but dar was them who said he cared only fur her money."

"Do you believe it?"

"It ain't fur me ter judge, but I do know Massa Robert called him a fortune-hunter."

"Doubtless, he had other plans for his daughter's future."

"Yes, sah; at least, he wanted her to marry an equal."

"Yet, he forgave them?"

"Not for two years, sah, an' den he saw de baby—Massa Roland—an' took sech a fancy to him dat he let them all come to de Lodge to live. Wal, sah, I was glad to see Miss Rosalind back, but a year made great changes in de family. First, Massa Robert died, an' den, when de rest ob de family went travelin', Miss Rosalind never come back!"

Vincent arose, went to the window, and, with his back to Phillis, made a pretense of looking out.

"How was that?" he asked in a low voice.

"She died in Cuba, sah, ob yellow fever, an' den Massa Roland, only four years old, was de last of Thornholm blood."

"How did Edward Crapo and the child escape the fever?" Vincent asked, in a voice strangely harsh.

"De good Lord knows, sah; I don't. But I know they came back to de Lodge. Miss Rosalind never came, though, for she was sleepin' under de tropic sun."

A strange quivering of the secretary's face

prevented reply at once. When he did speak his voice was husky.

"You must have mourned for her, Phillis."

"I did, I did!" declared the aged woman, while tears ran freely down her face. "I loved her more dan my own life."

Vincent wheeled, advanced to her side and laid his hand upon her arm.

"Affection which endureth through so many years will one day be rewarded, Phillis. The way and the time no man can tell, but your Miss Rosalind sees you from Heaven and loves you still!"

The words and the tremor of his voice went straight to the aged woman's heart. Her response was quick.

"Bless you, sah; bless you! Now you speak like Miss Rosalind."

"Indeed! Well, Phillis, loving her as you did, of course you were glad to see young Roland, child though he was; and you recognized him at once?"

"Nobody at de Lodge had seen enough ob him for dat. Soon after he was brought here first, Massa Robert died, an' den Massa Roland was took abroad."

"But he had the Thornholm features?"

"No. I s'pose he was like de Crapos, fur Massa Edward said he was jest like his gran'-father; but we all s'posed he had a Thornholm heart until he showed us de contrary."

"Is he not popular now?"

Phillis looked up suddenly.

"I's sayin' too much, sah!" she declared. "I have no right to talk ob de Thornholms like this. Massa Roland would not like it!"

"Your kind words for Miss Rosalind make amends for all. Of course Roland cherishes her memory?"

"I don't know," sighed Phillis. "Her portrait hangs in de old gallery, but I don't know that Massa Roland ever goes there. But she was an angel!"

"Right, Phillis, right!—at least, I feel sure of it from what you've said," the secretary added, breaking off an impulsive speech peculiarly.

"Yet, Massa Crapo married a year after she died."

"Of which marriage Miss Veva is the sole offspring?"

"Yes, sah; an' ain't she like Miss Rosalind?"

Phillis's voice was full of enthusiasm, but, as another negress entered, Vincent did not pursue the conversation further.

Taking formal leave he walked toward the Lodge, his face grave and set.

"I must be alone," he thought; "the story has stirred me up powerfully. They have called me Dangerous Dave in the past—pray heaven I may be doubly dangerous in the future!"

CHAPTER VI.

CRAPO INAUGURATES A MYSTERY.

ON the following day Vera and Roland rode over to Royalston Hall to visit Berenice. Several months were to elapse before the contemplated wedding, but Roland was not an indifferent suitor, and, as has been shown already, the girls were fast friends.

A discovery grew out of this ride.

Upon their arrival, Berenice had her own horse saddled, and the three rode along the northern road, passing the Hereford plantation, and, ultimately, taking the river road.

Roland failed in his duty as an escort; a summer shower came up quickly, with black clouds, and, finally, violent winds; but neither he nor the ladies noticed it until the rain was close at hand.

He was not to be blamed. Rude and rough as he was, he was deeply infatuated with Berenice, and, in her presence, forgot even his horses and dogs.

His motive for taking to school-books at his age was simple. She was refined and educated, he was coarse and unlearned. One day it occurred to him that, to hold her supposed affection, he must know more!

His resolution was at once made; he hired Vincent to teach him; he honestly intended to learn—but not for any money would he have had Berenice, or any outsider, know he had a schoolmaster at work on his dull wits.

It was torture for him to study, all of which proved how much he cared for Berenice, when he would endure so much to make himself more fit for her society.

It was the same undoubted regard for her that made him oblivious of the thunder-shower.

When it pounced upon them, as yet minus the rain, they rode at a gallop, but must certainly have been drenched had not Hereford Hall been reached.

Roland proposed that they stop and seek the captain's hospitality. Berenice shrunk from the proposal; much rather would she endure all the rain. She had not forgotten that painful interview; she knew Hereford had not forgotten.

Nevertheless, she could not persist in facing the impending outburst of Nature without exciting comment. She yielded; they entered the house.

Captain Hereford received all with even politeness.

He knew his duty as a host, and even Roland could not complain. Not by word or look did the strong officer remind Berenice of their late strange interview.

Yet, one discovery came of it.

They were in the Hereford parlor while the wind was driving the rain wildly against the windows. Among the captain's pictures was one representing a ridge in Mexico where he had led a charge against the enemy. Veva was enraptured with it, and made him tell of the red day of battle, while Roland and Berenice stood by a table at the other end of the room, looking at a rare book of engravings.

Hereford told the story well, but his heart was not in the work. With the short-sightedness of the man, he allowed his gaze to stray to the other couple; with the quick perception of woman, Veva read the gaze.

She was at once startled and grieved.

"Poor fellow! he loves her!" thought the girl. "I'm sorry, for he is noble and good. Perhaps, though, it's just as well that the marriage contract has been announced!"

She was not unconscious of Roland's deficiencies in certain directions, nor of Hereford's natural abilities.

Still, it alarmed her that the latter should really care for Roland's betrothed, and she was glad when, as night drew near, the rain ceased and a slender line of blue appeared at the horizon.

Their horses were brought, and they departed at a gallop.

The way was no longer pleasant. Deep mud covered the road, and, when they entered the wood beyond the Hereford estate, rain dripped from the branches.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Veva, with a shiver. "How gloomy it is. Such nights remind me of the ghosts my old nurse used to tell me about."

"Would that it were no worse," returned Berenice.

"What! are you, too, depressed of spirits?"

"Who wouldn't be, with the rain pattering on one's back?"

Berenice tried to make the reply very matter-of-fact, but she was glad that the partial darkness hid her face; the ordeal at Hereford Hall had been severe, and she wished it well over; she wished to be alone.

She was destined to have her nerves tried further.

The wood they were traversing stretched away for a mile or more at their right, but was, in places, only a fringe of bushes on the left, next to the river.

Suddenly, from the undergrowth, a human being sprang out and stood in their path.

The light was sufficient to reveal a woman of wild and wretched appearance. Her hair floated loosely, and her dress seemed like a mere sack. She raised both hands on high, and Veva uttered a faint cry of alarm.

The horses had paused and, anxious to flee, were pulling at the bit.

"Go back! go back!" ordered the strange woman in a hollow voice.

Roland uttered a savage exclamation. Detecting that the unknown was deranged, he was all the more angry. The unfortunate had none of his sympathy.

"Out of the way, woman!" he cried; and, striking his horse sharply, rode toward her with a force which bade fair to trample her under foot.

Berenice and Veva experienced fresh alarm, but, keeping her place, the mad-woman seized the horse by the rein and brought it to a standstill.

"Ha! ha! ha!" she laughed mockingly; "the way is not as smooth as you thought. Beware of the day when the weak shall be strong, and the strong shall be weak. Give me one-half of the road and ride on!"

The situation nettled Roland still further, and he half-raised his whip, but prudence returned. He dared not strike a blow against such an object in Berenice's presence.

"She is crazy," he remarked, as philosophically as possible. "Let us go quietly."

He turned his horse to ride around the woman, who folded her arms, but Veva looked at her intently.

"We must not go without her. If she is insane, it is our duty to aid her. In any case, she is wretched."

The woman laughed unmusically; then, suddenly wheeling, leaped again into the wood, and her footsteps were heard in rapid retreat.

"Useless!" observed Berenice, sadly. "Let us go!"

"But we ought to help her."

"We cannot find her in the woods."

"Of course not; the idea is absurd!"

The last words, roughly spoken, were from Roland, but Veva realized that they were true. She said no more, and they went on.

The girls speculated considerably as to the identity of the unfortunate wanderer, and commented on her hard fortune in having to pass the night in the water-drenched wood. Roland had nothing to say; he was glad that one who had dared lay a hand on his rein should have a lot so hard.

Berenice was left at her home, and Veva and Roland went on alone. Once, the kind-hearted

girl suggested that some of the negroes be sent to aid the unfortunate, but she was answered so harshly that she abandoned the idea with a sigh.

When they reached Thornholm Lodge they were observed from an open window by Edward Crapo, who called a slave and gave the order:

"Request my son to join me here when he has eaten."

Then he lifted a book from the table and began to read. It was a strange occupation for one who usually disdained books.

During the afternoon his studious employment had been observed by his wife, who had taken pains to discover, afterward, what the book was.

"The Life of Napoleon!" she murmured. "Something is on Mr. Crapo's mind!"

The strongest-minded men often have peculiarities. Crapo had his, and his wife knew it; she knew that, when he had any great undertaking on hand, he invariably took to perusing the Life of Napoleon. In the career of that remarkable man of destiny he found courage, inspiration and resources.

Edward Crapo was, really, almost a penniless man. By the will of Robert Allan Thornholm his son-in-law could claim nothing. The first Mr. Crapo, as has been explained before, had a life-lease on the Lodge, as a home; Crapo had nothing.

When Mrs. Crapo died, Edward remained for awhile because there was no one to object. When Roland grew up, want of objection on his part enabled his father to remain.

Though almost penniless, Crapo was as proud a man, in appearance, as any in Virginia. He carried his head as high as the highest; he was cold, haughty and reserved; he wore the clothes of poverty with the air of one possessing millions.

From Roland he received food and shelter, and nothing more. A slender income of his own enabled him to meet current expenses. Yet, he was always near the low-water mark.

Having given the message to the servant, Crapo resumed reading the Life of Napoleon. Schemes were in his mind, and he wanted strength and inspiration.

Roland finally answered the call.

"You wanted to see me?" he began, brusquely.

"Yes," Edward calmly replied. "A horse is to be sold at Glenville which I wish to purchase. He can be had for five hundred dollars, and I can double the money in six months. Unluckily," he calmly added, "I am penniless, and my quarterly income is not due for four weeks. Can you loan me the money?"

Roland looked in amazement, and then laughed aloud.

"What!" he exclaimed, "are you ambitious to become a sporting man?"

The elder man's firm face did not change expression.

"I'm ambitious to make five hundred dollars on the sale," was his even reply.

"Have you faith in your judgment?"

"I have proved my judgment in the past," Crapo calmly answered. "I made my son heir of Thornholm!"

"Zounds! so you did, and I admire your taste. To prove it, I will marry an heiress, as you did in your youth. Have the five hundred? Of course you can, and my blessing with it. Buy the horse; buy a dozen of them; and then I'll build a new stable, and we will turn the whole State pale with envy!"

"Thanks!" returned Mr. Crapo, without the least show of feeling.

"Anything more?"

"No."

"Then I'm off."

Roland left the room. He had agreed to the proposal readily because, since it concerned a horse, it touched his weakest spot; but, later, he thought of it with wonder.

"Strange!" he muttered. "He never asked money of me before. What can he want of this horse? I really believe he is deeper than I have thought!"

Deeper? If the speaker had but known it, his father's mind was so deep that he, dull-witted braggart, could not even surmise its reach and scope.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PLANTER MEDITATES MISCHIEF.

By the following day nearly every sign of the shower had passed away, and Roland Thornholm lost little time, after breakfast, in getting his gun and walking rapidly away, with a hound at his heels.

Vincent, seeing this from a window, smiled slightly.

"That looks like a truant scholar and no school," he thought. "Once let him get into the woods and he will forget that there is such a thing in the world as the French language."

Roland had forgotten it already. On the previous day he had set a trap on one of the tributary streams of the river, and, in his anxiety to learn if anything had been caught, he remembered nothing else.

A portion of his heart had been surrendered

to Berenice, but the greater part still remained with his old life.

The trap was found empty, but, not seriously disappointed, he wandered on with his gun ready for use.

He found strange game, that day!

He was walking where the nature of the ground made his progress almost noiseless when he emerged from a thicket and met a young lady so suddenly that only a mutual sudden halt prevented a collision. Then he stood dumb with surprise.

It was unusual to see a woman at that point, and still more unusual to see one like her. In years she seemed less than twenty, but her form was one of maturity and perfect proportions. Her face was regular, bright, intelligent and attractive, and her dress, though simple, was designed with the skill rarely seen with those of commonplace life.

Roland was dazzled. It looked as if some fairy of the woods had risen in his path, and he was not slow to make known an admiration which was sincere, if not respectful.

He lifted his hat with all the grace he could command.

"I beg your pardon," he said, laughing slightly, "and hope you'll excuse me for getting in your way."

"There is no occasion for apology, sir."

With these words, politely but formally spoken, she was moving away, but Roland stopped her.

He had recovered from his wonder in a measure, but more dangerous thoughts were in his mind. Knowing all of the aristocracy of the county, he also knew she could not belong to that select circle, even if her presence in the woods had not told that she was of a rank in life where she was unfettered by small formalities.

He was determined to know more about her.

"Wait!" he directed, less civilly than before. "You must have wandered from your course, so pray allow me to send you home in a carriage. I am the owner of this plantation—Thornholm, of Thornholm."

This announcement was expected to produce a palpitation of her supposed plebeian heart, but it caused no perceptible emotion further than a slight curling of her lips.

"I will not trouble you, sir; I can care for myself."

Before the words were fully spoken she was hurrying away, and her manner conveyed such an undoubted rebuff that he stood almost petrified with astonishment.

Such a thing had never occurred to him before; the proudest daughters of Virginia dared not frown upon him, while this humble girl had administered a most curt and decided repulsion.

The red tinge of anger rose to his face, and, after a pause, he took several steps in furious pursuit, but as abruptly paused. He remembered that, though on his own plantation, he was not exempt from the common law.

A smile, which was strangely out of place, crept to his face.

"So!" he muttered, "my lady, the beggar, scorns me, does she? Good! It will be rare pleasure to break her will. I'll follow and see where she lives, and, with that knowledge gained, I'll humble her inside six weeks! Zounds! she's as pretty as an angel; I love her already! Yes; and I hate her, too; and the man who feels those two passions at once makes a bad enemy. Come, Comet!"

Whistling lightly to the dog, he renewed the pursuit. Few men in that region could do it better. He glided from cover to cover, using tree and bush to screen his progress, and exhibiting all of the furtive skill gained in his experience as a "still-hunter."

Apparently unconscious that she was followed the girl moved down the river for two hundred yards, and then turned toward the stream. A boat lay by the bank. She entered, took up the oars and rowed away down the stream.

Seeing that she did not intend to cross, Roland followed along the bank, keenly alert, but himself unseen, and, after a tramp of nearly two miles, had the satisfaction of seeing her land, secure the boat, and resume her way on foot.

His pursuit grew more eager, yet careful.

The girl reached a small glade and entered the humble, but neat, house which stood in its center. Then Roland sat down to rest.

"What a tramp!" he ejaculated. "I'm covered with perspiration and mud, and all for her! Ha! my lady, I've found your nest, and you shall yet pay dearly for your sins of the day. This hut is beyond my plantation, and I can't drive you out; but my blow shall be struck through your heart. That's the figure!"

A crackling of bushes caused the young planter to turn. He was no longer alone; a stoutly-built man was advancing.

He was one no longer young, but, though his hair and beard were nearly white, his figure was erect and full of indications of well-kept strength. He had a certain air which Roland read well.

"An ex-sailor, and, no doubt, as poor as Job's turkey. He may know who lives in the hut. I'll ask him!"

The stranger came on, looking sharply at

Roland. He had a frank, open face, naturally, but there was suspicion and distrust expressed therein at that moment.

"Beg your pardon, old man," began Thornholm, airily, "out can you tell me who lives in yonder cottage?"

"Why do you want to know?" came the response, quickly.

"I think of purchasing this tract of land, and want to know if they are good tenants," Roland glibly explained.

The elder man stroked his beard vigorously.

"You'll have to go further for the last information," he replied, curtly; "but if you are anxious to know who lives there, why, I don't hesitate to say I do; and I'm Captain Ned Norcross, late of the schooner Golden Wing."

The planter was instantly confused; he had blundered lamentably. By injudicious questions and arrogance he had introduced himself unfavorably to Captain Norcross, and if, as seemed probable, the beauty of the woods was his daughter, the ex-mariner's frown was proof that he would be found on guard.

"I—I didn't know—"

His stammering speech ceased entirely.

"Didn't know what?"

"Who you were."

"Have you ever heard of me?"

"No, but—"

"I understand. You took me for a servant, beggar, or something of the kind, and tried to gallop on to the port of information. Eh?"

"My dear sir, you wrong me!" cried Roland.

"Then why are you so confused?"

Thornholm made a strong effort to rally. The keen, suspicious glances of his companion, coupled with what had gone before, made him angry to an extreme, but he dared not give rein to his temper. He essayed an explanation, did his best to undo the mischief, and then beat a retreat which, he felt sure, was far from being graceful.

Captain Norcross shook his head as he watched the retreat.

"A bad young man, I'd almost swear. I've seen his kind before, and would not trust him. Still, he looks like a man of money. Possibly he does want to buy the land—but I doubt it. He don't look truthful. I'll watch my cottage well, and let him beware how he comes near it, unless his intentions are as open as his words!"

At the same time Roland was hurrying away, muttering angrily to himself:

"By my life! I came out of that badly!" he confessed. "The old man of the sea looked as if he read my very soul, and I can't say I did much to vindicate myself. Hang my stupidity! Why didn't I suspect, at the first, that he was the occupant of the cottage?"

Roland was thoroughly stirred up, and when the hound—the favorite of his pack—happened to get in the way, he received a kick that made him yelp dolefully.

"Done up bad!" the planter confessed, "but there is another day coming. That little beauty is as sweet as you please, and I'm bound to know more of her. I'll have her at my feet yet. Why shouldn't I have some sport while waiting for the day I'm to marry my stately Berenice?"

He knew of no reason, for honor was a thing unknown to him.

That day he was a poor hunter. Game came and went, but he saw it not. Holding a straight course toward home, he knew of nothing, thought of nothing, but the girl.

Who was she? It was strange he had never heard of her in the past, but, luckily, he thought, there was a future.

If he had not been so pre-occupied, he would, perhaps, have made a discovery by the way. Unknown to him, he passed Walter Vincent as he went, going so near that only a hundred yards intervened between them.

What was the mysterious secretary doing in the swamp?

CHAPTER VIII.

SIGNS OF THE IMPENDING STORM.

CAPTAIN NED NORCROSS sat in the door of his cabin, smoking. His thoughts were far away, and he did not notice that any one was near until, hearing a footstep, he looked up and saw Walter Vincent by his side.

He sprung up quickly and extended his hand.

"Welcome, my dear boy; welcome!" he cried.

"You are as welcome as a bake-shop to a shipwrecked sailor. But I almost thought you'd never come."

"Yet," replied the secretary, smiling, "I warned you that I couldn't get around often."

"Oh! I don't blame you a bit. I'm an old sailor, and—"

At that moment a girl darted out of the cottage and threw her arms around Vincent's neck with a demonstration of unquestionable affection.

It was the beauty of Thornholm's adventure.

"Oh! I'm so glad to see you!" she cried.

"Good!" he replied. "I was afraid you might have forgotten me."

"You wicked wretch!" she retorted.

"Strange how you like the wicked."

"Oh! the Bible sets us an example as to

prodigals, but we will put you on bread-and-water, for your feast!"

All were smiling happily, and the light conversation continued for several moments.

Standing there together as they did, a strong resemblance was to be seen between the secretary and the girl of the cabin. Their hair, eyes and general features were alike; the same expression was natural to both in time of careless or happy occupation; and they only differed where the square jaws and resolute mouth of Vincent gave place to womanly gentleness in the girl.

All this while the trio had been watched from the cabin by a middle-aged woman, and, seeing this, at last, the visitor went forward to greet her.

They entered the house. When seated, the secretary spoke again:

"I know you are all anxious to learn how I am progressing, but I can tell but little, as yet. I have searched the old cabinet, but the papers were not to be found."

"Where can they be?" asked the woman.

"Probably in dust and ashes, for years."

"I hope not."

"Edward Crapo is not the man to preserve such things."

"Then why did he send to Cuba for them?"

"That is the mystery, Maggie, and, as I told you ere I went to Thornholm, I don't understand his motive. By the way, Maggie, I've seen old Phillis."

"Hal! What did she say?"

"That I look more like the Thornholms than Roland does!"

The cabin beauty uttered a cry.

"Did she say that, Walter?"

"She did, Nina."

"Then the sky is clearing."

"It is only a speck. Of what good to us would be such a statement from a humble slave?"

"But you questioned her?"

"Only slightly; as I've said before, it won't do to hasten matters."

"Trust our boy for knowing how to do the job!" added Captain Norcross, with an emphatic nod.

"They named him Dangerous Dave, the Never-Beaten Detective, when he worked for others. He won't fail now he's working for himself."

"I work for more than that, captain," returned Vincent with emotion.

"I know, I know. But go on."

"You remember, Maggie," Vincent pursued, "that you told me of the old family portraits in the room where the cabinet stands?"

"Yes, Master Walter."

"I found all you said, with proof that human feet had pressed the floor but rarely in years. Moreover, I found there, among others, the picture of a lady young and beautiful. Beneath the picture was a name—not the artist's, but hers!"

"And the name?" questioned Maggie, eagerly.

"Was—*Rosalind!*"

A cry from Nina, and increased interest from all showed that the name told as much to them as it had to him on the night when he stood before the picture.

Maggie Warner rose abruptly. She had a rude, rugged face, strongly English in its type, but thoroughly honest of expression.

Standing before them, she clasped her hands and tears rolled down her face.

"Oh! Miss Rosalind, Miss Rosalind!" she cried, "Why was I so base as to desert you?"

Captain Norcross had a horror of tears, and he put out his hand quickly.

"Stop, stop!" he requested: "whatever you did, the lady's husband set the example."

Vincent rose with flashing eyes.

"Why did he do it?" the secretary demanded.

"Simply because he hoped she would die in Cuba. The weight of evidence will be strong against Edward Crapo at the Judgment Day. A mere fortune-hunter himself, he married Rosalind Thornholm for her money, and when she died he was not sorry."

"He was glad!" Maggie declared.

"Having seen the man, I can read him well. Selfish to his heart's core, he cares only for himself, though, with the passage of years, he has acquired a mask of cold dignity more becoming than the hot passions that once swayed him."

"And less fiendish than the honeyed deceit he used to win Thornholm's daughter," Norcross supplemented.

"True."

Vincent turned to Maggie and added:

"I have not a word of censure for you, for, at your age, and in a strange land, it would have been a wonder had you remained to brave the dreaded fever. Your present co-operation makes us truly friends, while to our captain of the ocean I have boundless gratitude."

He advanced and took the old man's hand, but the latter dashed the free hand across his eyes and broke into a roar worthy of any disciple of Neptune.

"Avast there, boy; avast with your praise. Don't weaken me! I never leave a vessel's deck until the last man is in the boats, and I never turn a deaf ear to the needy and suffering. Whatever I've done for you, I've been well paid."

Don't I love you and Nina like my own children? Of course I do, and—Avast, there; avast! Don't weaken me!"

The worthy captain put out his hands so imploringly that a general laugh followed.

"I cannot delay here," observed Vincent, later. "I must get back to Thornholm Lodge."

"What do you think of Veva Crapo?" asked Nina, with innocent curiosity.

A sudden change passed over the visitor's face. He was pacing the room, and, as his back chanced to be to the others, he kept his position and made a pretense of looking out of the window.

"She differs greatly from the others. I dislike," he confessed, in a low voice, "to bring sorrow to her."

"It must be so," Maggie declared, quickly.

"Right!" added the captain. "You must go on and pay no heed to the truck you find in your path!"

Vincent opened his lips quickly, and then closed them again. He resented the application to pretty Veva of the word Norcross had so heedlessly used, but he dared not express his sentiments.

"Rest assured that the work shall go on," he replied, after a pause. "The retribution of years is on its way, and I must succeed!"

"Your past experience as a detective will help you wonderfully," Maggie remarked.

"No; for no case I ever had before is like this. I almost forget that I am a detective; this is a slow, patient work, more like that of an Indian than like a detective's."

"You are fitted for both," asserted Norcross.

"My good friends, you all over-estimate my ability, but I must succeed, come what will."

A sudden, peculiar cry sounded from the inner room; a sort of angry snarl which startled Vincent.

Maggie quickly entered the other apartment.

"It's the poor fellow I fished out of the river," the captain explained.

"I had entirely forgotten him. Is he going to live?"

"His life-bark is riding on the dividing line between Life and Death, and the rival pilots are fighting over his possession. I take it the chances are about even."

"Have you learned who he is?"

"No."

"Unfortunate man!"

"He raves deliriously in French when the fever grips him the worst, but his own name is one of the things he don't reveal."

"He has no lucid interval?"

"Not one."

"I need not request you to take good care of him, for I know your nature."

"The fellow don't look like an escaped angel, by Neptune! but I allow that we take just as good care of him."

"I don't doubt it. Well, I must leave you. It would never do to let them get the least suspicion of me at Thornholm Lodge, and the sooner I get back the better."

"Do they misuse you there, Walter?" Nina asked.

"No. Nearly every one ignores me as an iceberg does a small fish."

"I suppose Veva Crapo is terribly cold and proud, isn't she?"

The secretary winced. Again, innocent Nina had touched a sensitive spot.

"Well, no; for one of her rank in life, she is far from being haughty. But this is idle talk; I must leave you."

Bidding each of the trio good-day, Vincent left the cottage and began the return journey.

Roland had reached home ahead of his school-master, but, as he had not thought of books, the absence of the teacher had gone unnoticed. Thus far Vincent was free from suspicion.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN OF ICE ASSERTS HIMSELF.

THAT same afternoon Mrs. Crapo entered the library and found her husband diligently perusing the Life of Napoleon. Not by so much as the raising of an eyebrow did the august Edward betray that he noticed her arrival, but his devotion to the book interested and worried Mrs. Crapo.

When he read the Life of Napoleon the scent of battle was in the air, and, as his wife knew how frail was the the foundation beneath their feet, metaphorically speaking, she had to take heed to the fact that unceasing vigilance was the price of luxury.

She sat down and, after a deliberate pause, Crapo closed the book and fixed his regard upon her.

"Is our master away?" he asked.

"Our master?" Mrs. Crapo repeated.

"Master Roland!"

"Oh! Yes; he is absent."

"Then let me speak of him. I suppose you know that his matrimonial schemes form a crisis in our lives?"

"How so?"

"When he brings the new mistress here he will have no need of the old. We shall be incumbrances."

A faint color rose to Mrs. Crapo's cheeks. "Do you anticipate anything serious?" she asked.

"Clouds herald storms; I have suggested what may be. We need not fear Berenice; she is of that nature sometimes termed noble, and would not do a mean thing, I really believe. But Roland is hot-tempered and selfish; he may drive us away."

"It would be an atrocious injustice!" declared Mrs. Crapo, warmly.

Her husband shrugged his shoulders.

In the affairs of life he looked not at justice and injustice, but at the cards he held in his hand.

"We will not mention that; enough that Roland is supreme master of Thornholm. I shall never forgive Robert Allan Thornholm for making such a will. What did he fear? Don't I know the value of money? I proved that fact by marrying a rich man's daughter, yet it has only given me a home!"

Mr. Crapo rustled the leaves of his favorite book, smiled coldly and continued:

"Robert Allan hated me cordially. He never hesitated to call me a fortune-hunter, and it was only when he saw Roland, who was taking his first steps, that my worthy father-in-law relented and let me in at his gate."

"You've remained some time."

Edward disregarded his wife's remark and calmly continued:

"When his will came, it was iron-clad. My wife had a life-lease here; I had nothing. It was to my infant son, who staggered under the weight of three guardians, that all the great fortune went. Beyond doubt, if Robert Allan had foreseen his daughter's death, there would have been a clause in the will forbidding my presence here at all. Oddly enough, he forgot that possibility. I have remained simply because no one cared to oust me, but Roland had, and has, the estate and the money. Now, we are in danger of being exiled by this supreme ruler of Thornholm!"

Mrs. Crapo clearly understood, at last, why her liege lord read Napoleon, but, as it was upon the deeds of the mighty man of war that he relied for inspiration, she wondered what the result had been.

"What are we to do?" she asked.

"You know how I lived when you first knew me?"

The lady shuddered.

"Don't speak of that—"

"I must. Yesterday I borrowed five hundred dollars of Roland. I am the most accomplished card-player in Virginia, and I intend to make that sum five thousand at one sitting, one of these nights. We need a reserve fund."

"What is five thousand dollars? We cannot live on that. If Roland drives us away—"

"Pardon me for interrupting," requested Crapo, calmly, "but I see you are worrying. Don't do that. If the time ever comes that Roland and I are pitted against each other, I shall be master!"

"You?"

"I!" replied Edward, serenely.

Mrs. Crapo was astonished. Dreading to be expelled from the Lodge she had always lived in fear of Roland, and her husband had added fuel to her fears. The change of base puzzled her.

"Have you learned something new against him?" she inquired.

"No. Yet, the strong Samson of this house is but a weakling in my hands; should the necessity ever rise, I will bend or break him. Enough of this! I merely wished to say I am going to Washington for a few days. Once there, we will see if my cunning at cards remains with me."

Mrs. Crapo was not shocked. The early life of husband and wife—and they had known each other much longer than was supposed by any but themselves—had been such that the lady did not shrink from the mention of gambling.

She did, however, fear exposure, and would have remonstrated, but Edward returned to his book with an air, not new to her, which closed the conversation summarily.

Glancing from the window, a little later, she saw Veva and Hector, the dog, receding among the trees of the grounds, but a bend in the path hid them from view, a moment later, and she failed to see Walter Vincent join Miss Crapo.

The meeting was accidental, but neither seemed inclined to avoid it, and, after walking a short distance, they sat down under a big tree.

Each day that the secretary remained at Thornholm saw the bond between him and Veva grow stronger.

At the first, before he knew that she was Crapo's daughter, he had taken a strong fancy to her; when he learned her identity, he had placed a guard upon his feelings, knowing that an impassable barrier lay between them, but had found it hard to deny himself the pleasure of her company.

She was bright, sparkling and kind-hearted; they had many tastes in common; and each would have led a lonely life had they not met and enjoyed the long conversations they had had day after day.

Neither had any other congenial associate in the house.

In thus yielding to the pleasure of her company, he forgot that Veva knew nothing of the iron barrier. To her, with her disregard of that worldly delusion known as "position," there was nothing to prevent her from caring for the secretary as much as she liked.

That she meditated on this fact need not be considered here; enough that she was in association each day with a man she found a pleasant companion.

Vincent was thoughtless, but his aim was one of omission rather than of commission. He lacked vanity, and, unlike some men, did not expect every young lady to fall in love with him.

The present interview began as pleasantly as the others, but it was disagreeably interrupted.

They were talking with animation when a little cough sounded, and they looked up to see John Jay Lennox standing before them.

Mr. Lennox was one of the greatest annoyances of Veva's life. He was wealthy and of good family, and was a neighbor; but his shallow, effeminate, foppish nature made him an object of secret derision to nearly every one.

Veva, in particular, had cause to dislike him—as has been explained before, he aspired to her hand.

When, on this occasion, he had come upon the couple and found them conversing with so much animation, he had stared awhile through his eyeglass in dumb amazement, and then interjected the little cough.

The flush of confusion rose to Veva's face.

"Beg pardon," quoth John Jay, bowing stiffly; "I did not intend to intrude. I was looking for Roland."

"I haven't seen him since morning," replied Veva, rallying. "Perhaps Mr. Vincent can give you some information."

"He went away with his gun, and, I think, has not returned," Vincent explained, quietly.

"Were he here you would doubtless have been called to your duties ere now," remarked Lennox, bringing his eyeglass to bear upon the previous speaker.

Vincent understood the insinuation.

"Very likely," he returned, calmly.

"I suppose my secretary is at this moment dusting the library," added John Jay, who did not suppose anything of the kind.

"A very useful man!"

Veva's eyes were sparkling with resentment, for she, too, perceived the planter's deliberate intention to insult and degrade the secretary, but she felt that the latter's coolness was a better weapon than angry retort.

"Perhaps you will find my brother at the other end of the grounds," she remarked, pointedly.

"I'm too weary to search; I think I'll sit down."

"You can have the whole of the bench, for I am going to the house. Are you ready, Mr. Vincent?"

"Quite ready."

Calmly they arose and walked away, leaving John Jay Lennox in a condition of agitation and anger.

He wondered that the earth did not open and swallow such malefactors.

"Scorned!" he uttered, tragically, clutching at his left breast, where his heart was supposed to be located. "Scorned!—and for a menial!"

Volumes could not have expressed more, unless in larger type, as it were, than was the noble Virginian.

Vincent had not forgotten the rumor that Lennox was a suitor for Veva's hand, and he realized that trouble might come from this episode, but, when he would have referred to it, the girl kept the conversation persistently in other channels.

A diversion occurred, however, when they turned a curve in the path, and saw a woman sitting on one of the rustic benches.

The secretary's first glance showed no more than that she was one of those wretched, ill-clad, perhaps half-insane people who are to be found wandering about the country everywhere; but Veva remembered the woman she had met in the wood when riding with Roland and Berenice, and felt sure it was the same one.

The woman raised her head, which had rested upon her hand, and looked at them attentively as they approached.

Her appearance was most miserable.

Her clothes were ragged; her gray hair tangled and flat, and from beneath the handkerchief which formed the only covering for her head, great dark eyes gleamed with the brilliancy of mental disorder.

Despite this, her haggard face still bore some signs of past beauty and refinement.

Veva left Vincent's side and moved forward, putting out one hand reassuringly when she saw an inclination to flee on the woman's part.

"Don't be frightened," she urged, kindly. "I am your friend, and no one shall harm you."

The unknown brushed her hands across her eyes. She seemed struggling to clear her shadowed mind, but it was a work of difficulty.

Vincent, thoroughly in sympathy with the

girl's kindness, stood in silence while she moved forward and laid her hand gently upon the wanderer's arm.

CHAPTER X.

VEVA LISTENS TO THE LAW.

THE strange woman watched Veva's approach like one bewildered. There was, perhaps, less of wildness in her manner than before, but it was a fictitious state from which she might rouse and rush away.

"Will you let me sit beside you?" asked Veva, with the same gentleness. "I've been walking, and, as you look weary, we will rest together."

"Walk!" exclaimed the unknown, sharply. "What do you know about walking? Your dainty feet would never stand the long journeys I've made. Ah! I'm no child; I've seen one-half of the face of the earth. When the demon moves his wand around my head so!"—she described a circle in the air with her hand—"I rise and walk, walk, walk! Ha! ha! I ride in no painted carriage, nor behind a puffing engine. I walk, walk; always walk!"

She spoke with unnatural exultation, but Vincent unconsciously drew near, and Veva's sympathies grew stronger yet.

"Will you go to the house and get food?" she asked, persuasively.

"Why should I? Why should one like me seek a house, when earth furnishes food, drink and bed? Houses are for the dainty and delicate, like you."

Her manner was brusque and unpromising, but Vincent had grown so interested that he took a hand in the conversation.

"Is your home far from here?" he asked.

"Home!" she echoed, frowning upon him. "Don't talk to me of home! It is a place where there is happiness only for folks too proud or indolent to work. As for me, I prefer to walk—always to walk!"

Both the young people were filled with one idea. It was a terrible life for this mad creature to wander about the country, and they were anxious to help her. But the ways and means were not easy to find.

She watched them closely, and it was clear that a rash movement would put her to flight.

Veva did not despair. Anxious to supply her with food and clothing, if nothing more, she continued her persuasive efforts to induce the unknown to enter the house, but the latter grew restless and was seized with the old desire to walk.

Suddenly she sprung up, and, turning her face away from the house, bounded away like a deer in full chase. The trees soon concealed her from view.

The encounter had impressed Veva and Vincent deeply, and their few words in regard to her were absent-minded and grave.

They separated at the house, but, as Veva was about to enter the library, she heard the sound of voices which indicated a caller. Retreating, she learned his identity from a servant.

It was John Jay Lennox!

Miss Crapo's face flushed. She knew that he was a suitor for her hand, and that a certain person intended to dispose of her as unceremoniously as if she had been a mere article of merchandise.

She wondered, now, if Lennox had been cowardly enough to go to her father with the story of the recent scene in the grounds.

"Let him dare," she thought, indignantly, "and we are strangers from this hour. He is mean enough to drive Mr. Vincent away from the Lodge—if Roland would let him go. I'm not sure he would, for he admitted that Mr. Vincent is a capable man; but that don't acquit Lennox of blame. Anyhow, Mr. Vincent is a thousand times superior to him!"

She had turned and was looking out of the window, but she saw nothing. An expression was on her face which was almost one of tenderness.

Her own thoughts brought a richer color to her fair face.

Wholly free from worldly pride, she cared nothing for the fact that Vincent was a salaried man. She had her own opinion of him, and it was highly favorable. If she was destitute of mere pride she was without boldness, also, and her actions were always creditable, but she guarded her thoughts less than her deeds.

She might yet find that, in the secretary's case, she had guarded the former too little.

Later, she saw Lennox ride away from the house, and then a servant came to say that Mr. Crapo wished to see her in the library.

"It has come!" Veva thought.

She answered the summons at once, and nothing in her manner indicated that she expected a storm. Crapo, on his part, was like an elaborate marble statue as he met her gaze. No trace of anger marred that placidity which he so much admired in himself.

"You sent for me, sir?" she began, quietly.

He waved his hand toward a chair.

"Be seated, Miss Crapo," he directed, in an even voice. "It is a matter of business, and we need not delay. I suppose you are aware that Mr. Lennox has called?"

"Yes, sir."

"He and I spoke of the Lennox property, and

I am surprised at its extent. Besides his plantation, he has in Washington a winter residence and a whole block of business buildings. Taken all in all, he is worth a couple millions, and his is an old and honored name. A lucky fellow is Lennox!"

Mr. Crapo looked meditatively at his white, aristocratic hands, and waited for a reply. He received none, so he resumed:

"His business of to-day delighted me. I have for several years been wondering how I was to effect a brilliant marriage for you. An heiress can easily find a husband, but your only inheritance is poverty. Mr. Lennox has solved the enigma. He has made a formal proposal for your hand!"

"It's a pity he should waste his breath," replied Veva, coldly.

Crapo's eyebrows rose in surprise.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Simply that I don't aspire to be Mrs. Lennox."

"But you would not refuse such an offer?"

"I certainly would not accept."

"Why not?"

"Because that man's presence is torture to me. He is shallow, conceited—"

"Stop!" ordered Crapo, sternly, "that is enough. Remember, he is a Virginian!"

"I don't care if he is a king!"

Edward Crapo looked at his daughter with a frown, which was intended to crush this incipient rebellion, but, while respectful of manner, her face bore a very determined expression.

"My dear child," he pursued, casting aside his usual coldness, "I trust that you are not in earnest. I am reluctant to believe you will reject the splendid future Lennox can give you."

"His wealth weighs nothing with me. What answer you gave him I don't know. Mine is ready, and it is plain 'No!'"

"Perhaps you prefer the secretary?" sneered Crapo.

"Sir!"

"Repress your tragic airs, Miss Crapo. I have heard of the scene in the grove, when you deliberately rebuffed Lennox and went off with your brother's servant."

The sneer aroused Veva's indignation, but she was shrewd enough not to involve Vincent further.

"Any one's company is better than Lennox's."

Her reply put Crapo off the new line of attack.

"Your treatment of Lennox was infamous!" he declared, harshly. "Understand, it will not be tolerated. As your father, I am the proper judge of what is best for you. The chance must not be lost."

"Am I to have no voice in the matter?"

"At your age, the mind is callow, weak and unreliable. Age clears the vision. Money, Veva, is the lever that moves the world, and, while the golden chariot rolls past, Beauty and Genius stand on the curb and crane their necks for a jealous view. Learn this lesson early, child!"

"I will leave philosophy to you, sir. As a woman, I must decline to rush to misery, plated with gold though it may be."

"Willful girl! your folly is disgraceful! It is my wish—nay, my command—that you marry John Jay Lennox!"

Excitement was breaking through his cold calmness, and her face flushed.

"Father," she answered, with emotion, "you cannot say that I have ever disobeyed you, but, in this matter, you expect too much. In disposing of my future, I must be guided by my own preferences. I cannot marry Mr. Lennox!"

An outburst on Crapo's part seemed to be at hand, but, by a great effort, he controlled himself.

He realized that Veva was no longer a child, and her respectful firmness indicated a will which he must consider, if not respect.

"Great events should be calmly considered," he returned, slowly. "We will drop this matter for the present. Take time to think. Listen to the dictates of wisdom. And meanwhile, let love and peace be between us. I do not forget that you are my only daughter. That is all, for now!"

He had risen and opened the door, and, glad to escape, he hurried out without a word.

Crapo was alone.

"Miserable child!" he muttered, "to what will her folly bring us? Lennox is a creature of wax, and, once in my hands, could be made to settle a sum on me for life. Veva must—she shall marry him. As a last resort I have my hold upon Roland, but he may break rather than bend. Veva must marry Lennox!"

The schemer's mind went back over the past. His precarious existence in early life had given enough of poverty. Dreading to be banished from Thornholm when Roland married, he turned to Veva as the life-boat between himself and poverty.

"She shall marry him!" the father reiterated.

CHAPTER XI.

VINCENT READS HIMSELF.

CAPTAIN HEREFORD, having ordered his horse, leaped into the saddle and spoke so sharp-

ly to him that the animal dashed down the driveway at a gallop.

The negro groom looked after them in wonder. "Clar' ter gracious!" he exclaimed, "I doan' know what ter make ob Massa Arthur these yere days. He used fur ter be de kindest man in de world, an' now he's sharp an' te'chy, an' rides Gladiator like Tom McShanter. I's afeerd he ain't well!"

Hereford's malady was not of the body, but, ever since that evening at Thornholm, he had been in a mental state so miserable that a measure of it was communicated even to his slaves.

As the negro had said, the captain was a man as kind as he was brave, but, of late, few had escaped sharp orders at his hands.

The worthy planter was brooding over the biggest kind of a puzzle with which he had ever grappled.

It was bad enough to be refused by Berenice, but that was not the half of the case. She had confessed that she did not care for Roland Thornholm, to whom she was betrothed, and *did* love Hereford, whom she had refused.

Even if Berenice had been mercenary, which she was not, it would have been unexplainable on any natural grounds, for Hereford's wealth and worldly position were quite equal to his successful rival's.

If Berenice had not betrayed the fact that she loved him, the captain, like an honorable man, would have crushed down his love. As it was, he could not defy it; human nature was all against such a course.

Again, while admitting that she loved him, she had plainly said: "If I were wholly free I could never become your wife, Arthur Hereford!" As she was the furthest removed from being fickle and uncertain of any woman he had ever known, this was inexplicable to him.

Once, since the mystery began, he had called at Royalston Hall to see her. She sent word that she was ill.

He wrote a note, and she returned the brief reply: "Do not seek to learn what you must never know; instead, learn to forget!"

In this case Hereford was a dull scholar; he had not learned to forget, or made any step toward it.

It was the day after Veva's ordeal that he started on the gallop before referred to. He had not gone far before reason returned. He moderated his speed and rode at a respectable pace along the road which extended through the wood between his own residence and Royalston Hall.

Unconsciously, he had taken that route. As he finally became aware of his course he was about to turn when he saw another horseman in advance.

"Thornholm's secretary," he murmured. "I'll join him. He will probably proceed to tell me all about the coming wedding, and that will be joyful news!"

Smiling in bitter sarcasm, he again quickened Gladiator's pace and joined Vincent.

"We ride the same road," he observed; "suppose we go together."

"Willingly," the other man responded. "I've had a solitary journey to Glenville, and thus far home, and company will be very welcome."

"Is your home in Glenville?"

"No; down the river."

"One of my negroes asked, the other day, if you were not related to the Thornholms. He was but little younger than the present owner's grandfather, Robert Allan Thornholm; and he declares that you resemble him."

Vincent laughed.

"You don't suppose I'm a long-lost son, do you?"

"I fear not, though perhaps it would have pleased Robert Allan Thornholm if you had been his son. The coming into the family of Edward Crapo was a bitter blow to the old gentleman."

"Yet he made Edward's son his heir."

"The son was taking his first steps then. Perhaps—perhaps the will would have been different if old Mr. Thornholm could have looked into the future."

"Roland's mother died in Cuba?"

"Yes; of yellow fever."

"Roland and Crapo were lucky to escape."

Hereford hesitated for a minute.

"My father once told me he had a suspicion that Crapo deserted his wife as soon as she was taken ill, but there is no proof of the fact."

"Had Roland changed during their absence?"

"I don't know. I was only a child then. But I know what he has been as a boy and a man."

Hereford checked himself suddenly, and as abruptly changed the subject. He was too honorable to prejudice others against his successful rival, whatever he might have done if there had been no contention between them.

After a little trivial conversation they emerged from the wood and passed along the road which cut the Royalston plantation in halves.

Vincent was surprised to see his companion become suddenly silent and morose, but as he noticed Hereford's peculiar glances to the left, the suspicion he had gained at Roland's party suddenly revived.

Did Hereford care for Berenice?

"If so, I'll help him all I can!" thought the detective.

At that moment they passed several intervening trees and saw Berenice and Veva together in the grounds. This did not surprise him, for he knew Crapo had brought Veva over in a carriage, but as he again glanced at his fellow-rider, the latter's expression so impressed him that he determined to undertake the bold artifice.

"Shall we call, captain?" he asked, quietly, ignoring the fact that he was, himself, only a salaried man.

Hereford started, looked sharply at the speaker, and then replied:

"Vincent, I'll trust you. I think I'm safe."

"Decidedly, you are."

"Then I'll stop on one condition—that you will try to draw Miss Crapo away, so I can see her friend privately."

"Done, captain!"

They entered the grounds.

Hereford looked in vain for confusion or coldness in the reception given him by Berenice; she was calm and smiling, and he was staggered anew.

The secretary did not forget his promise, and after a little idle conversation, he boldly suggested to Veva that she show him through the grounds. If it was presumption in one of his station, Veva gave no evidence that she so regarded it. She quickly rose to comply with the request.

At that moment she forgot her suspicion that Hereford cared for Miss Royalston, nor did she notice the imploring glance with which the latter pantomimically besought her to remain.

Hereford and Berenice were left alone.

"Miss Royalston," said he, humbly, "I fear you will never forgive me for venturing here."

She rallied quickly.

"There is nothing to forgive, captain. We have been friends always; why not now?"

"I must ask your pardon for the events since—since— But I have been scarcely sane. Berenice, you leave me all in the dark; you doom me to—"

"Why will you refer to that?" she interrupted, with agitation.

"How can I do otherwise?"

"You add to the trouble. I have said—"

She paused, and he finished the sentence:

"That, though Thornholm's betrothed, you love me! You refer vaguely to an insurmountable barrier between you and me, and will not say what it is. Berenice, deeply as I care for you, if you will say what that obstacle is, I will, if you then command it, never speak of love to you again!"

She had listened patiently, though her face was pale.

"You ask what is impossible," she replied, shivering.

"Pardon me, but has any one dared circulate rumors derogatory to my character?"

"No, no; every one speaks well of you."

"Then, what is the secret?"

"Whatever it is, it dies with me. I have sworn never to tell."

"From whom did you learn it?"

"That I cannot tell. You have my best wishes. Ask no more, and spare me further pain."

She put her hand to her forehead with a gesture of such weariness and suffering that his conscience smote him heavily. His mood changed abruptly.

"Forgive me, Berenice; forgive me. Your wishes shall be respected, but—the knife strikes deep!"

"I am very sorry."

"I could bear it if— But never mind!"

"I hope I have not wounded you unnecessarily," she said, humbly.

"You? No; I can swear you never did that to any one."

"Don't!" she almost whispered.

"Have I sinned again?"

"No. But don't speak well of me!"

"At least, I can think well of you."

He leaned against a tree, his own face pale; and Walter Vincent, looking across the lawn, thought that the couple would make appropriate figures for a group of statues representing collected Misery.

Turning away, the secretary looked at Veva. Her cheeks were flushed, and the light of happiness was in her eyes. It was a dangerous sight for him, with their lives shaped as they were, but he looked—looked, and read his own heart!

"Great heavens!" he thought, "this must go no further! I'll avoid her; she must never surmise what was in my heart!"

He was confused, and might have made a bad matter worse, but, at that moment, Veva chanced to glance toward the mansion, and saw Edward Crapo coming down an adjacent path.

There was danger. After the suspicion already partially ingrafted in his mind, he could not fail to be freshly excited if he saw her with the secretary.

Her woman's wits rose to meet the crisis.

"My father has come for me, and I must hasten away. Will you remain and gather a few more flowers, and bring all to Thornholm? Please pluck them right here!"

Crapo had not yet seen them, she felt sure.

She skillfully conducted Vincent to where the shrubbery would conceal him, and the deed was done.

Then she hastened down the diagonal path. Crapo had seen Berenice and Hereford, and with his suspicious nature, he wondered if Roland's promised wife was in search of new conquests, but they had seen him in time to avert danger.

Veva fluttered into the group before Crapo could begin conversation, and in her effusive farewell with Berenice, all others were crowded out of sight and hearing, as it were.

Then she deftly captured her father, took him to the carriage, and they departed without the elder man, shrewd as he was, having suspected that mischief was brewing around him.

Again Hereford and Berenice were alone, but her expression touched him so much that he said not a word to worry her anew.

Vincent soon joined them, and the young men rode away. Hereford left the mystery deeper than ever.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HUMAN WOLVES OF THE TRAIL.

THE forenoon sun was shining brightly, and climbing high up in the sky. Vincent was in the library, waiting for Roland to appear and grapple with his lessons, but the mature pupil was long in coming.

The sun was almost at the zenith when he slouched into the library, his mouth expanded in a yawn.

"Howd'y!" he saluted, dropping into a chair, and rubbing a pair of inflamed eyes.

"Good-morning, Mr. Thornholm," the secretary quietly answered. "You are somewhat late."

"Played cards, last night, until the roosters were crowing for morning!"

"I suppose you are all ready for work?"

"Work! What sort?"

"On your books."

"Hang the books! Do you suppose I am going to wear my brains all out on them?"

"But we hardly ever get at them, at all, and then only for short sessions."

"That's enough."

"But you can't make good progress in that way."

"There is time enough in the future."

Vincent clearly saw that, bating books and study as only one of his nature can, he wished to defer action from day to day. This did not trouble the schoolmaster. He did not care whether Roland learned anything or not. He had not come there to teach him, if Thornholm had but known it, but as an excuse to get into the house, and his professional character was not at stake.

Now, Vincent had cleared himself by making a formal, if weak, protest, and was willing to let the matter rest.

Roland hesitated, and then added more energetically:

"Vincent, you are a pretty good sort of a fellow, I reckon, but your ideas on education are a little off. I recently heard Major Bob Livingstone, my neighbor, say that pupils ought to go slowly. Crowd them; rush them on with learning; and you raise the merry Old Nick. Moderation should govern education."

"Beyond doubt, that is so," was the grave reply.

"Now, you talk sensibly," declared Roland, with an air of relief.

"In any case, you are to be judge in your own case."

"Certainly; of course! You have sense, Vincent. No books for me, to-day. I'll have dinner, and then take my hounds and go to the swamp for a hunt. Do you ever use a gun, Vincent?"

"Occasionally."

"Why not join me, to-day?"

"Perhaps I will."

"Do it; come along. You're welcome!"

Roland spoke with an air of condescension. He felt guilty because he was not pressing his studies, and trying to fit himself for Berenice's company, and though, in point of fact, he would not have allowed the secretary to dictate to him in the least, he felt grateful to that gentleman because he had agreed that too much study was injurious.

He felt that he ought to make amends; hence, the invitation to join in the hunt.

Vincent accepted. He had nothing else to do, and was enough of a sportsman to know that a good deal of pleasure was to be found in a hunt, when all went well.

Dinner was duly eaten, and then they prepared for departure. Vincent was given a really excellent gun, and, when Roland had summoned his dogs, they started.

In one sense, the hounds were fine animals. Their master was a connoisseur, and not only could he tell the good points of a dog at sight, but he knew all about the minute considerations of pedigree.

Long and lithe, but muscular, were his favorites, and any one might have admired them if they had been less ill-tempered and ferocious.

Nearly every one but Roland was afraid of them; he gave them all of that rough affection common to men of his mental caliber.

Wonderful tales he told of their exploits, and nobody doubted that they could pull down any kind of game when once their strong jaws were upon it.

The hunters proceeded toward the swamp to the southeast. Vincent would have preferred any other course, for in that direction lay the Norcross cottage, but it was far enough away so that the chances of their going near it were very slight.

He did not object to the field of action.

When they entered the swamp Roland's own mind became busy, and his thoughts finally found vent in words.

"Have you made many new acquaintances around here, Vincent?" he asked.

"Almost none, Mr. Thornholm."

"Any down the river?"

The detective flashed a quick look at his companion, but Roland was plodding along with his gaze fixed upon the ground.

"No," was the quiet response.

"I have!"

"Indeed!"

"Yes; a perfect beauty!"

Something impelled Roland to be confidential; the desire of a low-minded man to boast of past or projected conquests. Usually, this would not have been enough to tempt him, for he was naturally cunningly secretive; but he was in a mood of weakness. He wanted to boast to this hired man of his.

If he had looked at the hired man he might have hesitated before going on, for Vincent's face had darkened. The reply, however, was quiet.

"Not an uncommon thing in these parts."

"If you mean that beautiful women are not uncommon I agree with you, but women like this particular one are deuced uncommon. She's a stunner!"

"I didn't know that any one lived in the swamp."

"Nobody does, unless it is Drake Hodge and Black Tuck, the outlaws; they live where they can get a bone to pick. My beauty lives beyond the swamp, by the river, in a cottage."

Vincent was perfectly sure that the cottage mentioned was Captain Norcross's, and that the "beauty" was Nina.

He longed to lay violent hands upon his present companion, but wisely bid his indignation.

"I happened on her in the swamp over south, there," the unconscious planter went on, "and I admit I was dazzled. Women who are pretty are thick hereabouts, but not one like her. I accosted her, and—well, to be frank, got beautifully snubbed. All right; the more spirit, the merrier."

"Having got the dead shake, I secretly followed her home."

"I wanted to know who she was, so, seeing a rough-looking old fellow hard by, I tried to pump him. I fell all over myself. The rough old fellow was her father, and I got another cold shoulder."

Roland paused, meditated upon his double rebuff, and added in an ugly voice:

"May the fiend fly away with me if I don't fix them yet, though!"

"You intend to get square?" questioned Vincent, quietly.

"Rest assured that I do. I've learned since who they are. The rough old fellow is Ned Norcross, a retired sea-captain, and the beauty is his daughter, Nina. Zounds! ain't she pretty, though!"

"Have you made their acquaintance yet?"

"Hardly."

"Do you intend to?"

"I intend to humble that proud beauty, by Jove! She began by scorning me; she shall end by loving me!"

"How will you accomplish this change?"

"That's what I'm going to decide."

"Are you going to the cottage again?"

It suddenly occurred to Roland that he was becoming too confidential by far. He sent a quick, suspicious glance toward Vincent's face. It did him no good. The first shock of alarm and indignation having passed away from his companion, the latter had summoned all of the resolution by which he had gained success in the days past as "Dangerous Dave," detective.

His face told no tales, but Roland did not lose his caution.

"No; I shall not go to the cottage," he answered.

"Then how will you make her acquaintance?"

"By going into the same circle of society she moves in. Ha! wasn't that a fox?"

Roland threw up his gun and made a pretense of looking sharply into the brush. He soon announced that he was in error, and they went on, but he took care to keep conversation away from the former subject by talking rapidly about something else.

Vincent understood the stratagem. He knew that the planter had not seen a fox, or thought that he did. The hounds were calm; Roland's brief excitement had been fictitious.

He had merely grown wary, and dropped the

subject with an artifice not wholly without shrewdness.

Real game was soon encountered, and Roland showed himself a good shot; but Vincent did not at first cover himself with glory. Much to his companion's disgust he missed several times.

There was good reason for this. The secretary was so worried and angry over Roland's bold statement of his intention to molest Nina, that he was to be excused for poor marksmanship.

He felt more like chastising the fellow than annoying foxes and other game.

Later he recovered his calmness, and won praise from the planter by shots not inferior to the latter's.

While engaged in still-hunting, anon, Vincent found himself separated from his companion, and it was then that he discovered strange game.

A woman, ragged and wretched of appearance, suddenly appeared a few rods away, hurrying toward the east, and he recognized her at once. She was the same wanderer he and Veva had seen at Thornholm.

He stopped, uncertain as to what he ought to do, and then saw two men following the mad-woman.

They were Drake Hodge and Black Tuck, the outlaws, and each carried a gun.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MAD-WOMAN FINDS A DEFENDER.

VINCENT immediately saw that mischief was afoot. Such was always the case when the swamp refugees were on the move. No thought ever entered their minds except those of violence and evil-doing.

Their presence near the unfortunate mad-woman was not one of chance. They were following her deliberately, and their brutal faces were aglow with the spirit of depravity.

As the woman was neither young nor pretty, and had not a thing of financial value, there could be but one object in their pursuit—that spirit of barbarous cruelty which ruled them made it seem rare sport to persecute the afflicted creature. Perhaps they would end the affair by murdering her, and leaving her in the swamp.

The detective's blood boiled with indignation, metaphorically speaking, and he determined to have a hand in the affair.

The woman was deserving of the deepest pity, terribly afflicted as she was, and it mattered not if she was dressed in miserable rags. He had twice met Drake Hodge and Black Tuck, and was not sorry to have a chance to give them a fresh lesson.

By the time he had comprehended the situation fully they had passed him, but he hastened in pursuit.

He had been getting into an unusually bad part of the swamp, where the way was wet and disagreeable, but, as he closed up the gap on the outlaws, he saw the mad-woman ascending the side of a knoll beyond.

Hodge and Tuck stopped short. They looked first at the fast-disappearing woman, and then at the ground immediately in front of them.

Vincent easily saw why they had stopped—there was treacherous footing ahead.

Around the base of the knoll extended a rim of mere mud and water. It was not an inviting-looking place. Several half-decayed logs lay in the mass which would have furnished secure footing had it not been what he suspected, a mere jelly as to the immediate foundation.

Off at one side was a bed of sand which looked perfectly firm and hard, but Hodge flung a stone upon it, and the stone sunk quickly.

It was a quicksand.

He was about to accost the outlaws at once when they made a forward movement, stepping upon the logs before mentioned, and using great care.

There was good reason why they should be careful; the logs slowly sunk in the mud under their weight, and it was only by quitting each hurriedly for the next that they escaped the grasp of the quivering mud.

Clinging to the upright trees that rose from the place, they hastened on.

It was too late to stop them then, and, as the dangerous place was not over twenty yards wide, the detective determined to follow. They crossed and began to ascend the knoll; he began the passage. It was then that he realized fully what the place was, and he was ready to believe that a man caught in the grasp of the mud would never get out alive.

One rash or luckless step would accomplish this result, and he was duly careful.

By the time he was over, all of his predecessors had disappeared, and he made haste to ascend the knoll. When he reached the top he found it was small, containing only about one acre. It was heavily, but not thickly, wooded with pines, all of which were of noble dimensions. They were both tall and massive, and a finer growth he had never seen.

The ground was carpeted with needles fallen from the trees until one could walk about in ghostly silence.

At the top he found Hodge and Tuck.

They were creeping toward a shanty just beyond, and he easily understood that they supposed the mad-woman to be there.

He hastened to close up the gap, but, before he had done this, they entered the shanty. He, too, was soon at the door. As he reached it a wild voice sounded, and he saw the woman confronting the outlaws.

"Ha! what do you here, caitiffs?" she demanded, in exaggerated language.

Drake Hodge laughed hoarsely.

"We've come ter see you, darlin'!" he responded.

"I know you not. Get you gone!"

"Not much! We've come ter git you!"

"I tell you, begone!"

"Jest like a gal, by mighty!" asserted Hodge, rubbing his hands together. "They are coy an' coquettish, an' hate ter come down ter business. Say, old lady, don't yer ketch on? We're in love with yer, an' hev come a-wooin'!"

The remarkable humor of his white ally so affected Black Tuck that he clasped his arms over his stomach and nearly doubled up in a paroxysm of mirth.

"Get thee hence, or I'll report you to the king!" declared the mad-woman.

"Whar is he?"

"All around. In the air; in the waters; in the sky; in the earth."

"Say, he's a rooster, ain't he? Never heard of a man who could kiver so much space afore. But what has that ter do with our love fur you?"

The negro laughed until tears ran down his coarse, scarred face.

"Hol! hol!" he managed to utter; "if you ain't de debbil's own, Hodgey! Keep it up!"

The unfortunate woman was growing greatly excited. Despite her darkened mind she realized that the men were scoundrels, and was uneasy in their presence.

"How dare you come here?" she cried.

"Jes' 'cause we're in love with yer, I say."

"Away! away! Quit my sight! Brutes, I bid you go!"

Hodge's eyes twinkled evilly.

"Say, Tuck, what 'll we do with her?"

"Take her to de mud an' dump her in," suggested the negro.

"Hol! an' see how quick she'll sink out o' sight? Good! We'll do it!"

"Hol! hol!" roared Tuck.

"At her, my jewell!"

Both men moved forward. They did not reach their victim. Not wishing to do manslaughter, and well aware that, if the two outlaws saw fit to stand boldly before him, and they might, in the swamp, if they had not done so on previous occasions; Vincent had found outside a strong, resinous, water-soaked pine limb which was admirably suited for a club.

As such it was now used.

Before Hodge and Tuck could seize the woman the club began to play upon their heads. Blow after blow Vincent gave unsparingly. They turned in alarm and confusion, but too late to save themselves.

In a very short time both were stretched senseless on the ground.

The mad-woman had been looking on in rapt silence, but she now put out her hands imploringly.

"Keep back! keep back! Give me time to think!" she gasped, tremulously.

"Have no fear; you are now safe!" Vincent kindly answered.

"But I behold a sea of blood!"

"Be calm! The danger is all over."

"Strange shapes go before my eyes."

"Come away with me, and I will protect you."

"Wait! wait!"

She flung the tangled hair back from her eyes, and then covered her face with her hands, but her manner was quieter than was to be expected.

Vincent did not hurry her, but improved the pause to look about him.

The shanty was a most miserable affair. The walls were clumsy posts and poles, and the roof partly of boards and partly of other material, but the hand of time was over all. The posts had decayed until the whole shanty leaned to one side, and a single person might have pushed it over; some of the boards of the roof had rotted in two and fallen in; and a more wretched hovel it would have been hard to find.

There was no flooring whatever, but a pile of pine boughs in one corner indicated that the mad-woman had been making it her home and her sleeping-place.

Vincent sighed. Her condition appealed in every way to him, and he then and there resolved to take her out of the swamp and, in some way, see her comfortably provided for elsewhere.

She did not stir, and, afraid that Hodge and Tuck would recover consciousness, Vincent advanced and touched her arm gently.

"Come!" he said gently. "Let us go!"

She uncovered her face and looked up. Her eyes were mild and subdued, if not filled with the light of reason.

"I am ready," she returned, quietly.

He took her hand and they started, but she stopped short as she saw Hodge and Tuck.

"Who are these men?" she asked, a troubled look appearing on her face.

The detective saw that she had entirely forgotten the late exciting scene.

"Never mind," he answered. "Let us go on!"

He led her from the hut, and down the knoll. She obeyed him with the docility of a child, but without a child's intelligence. If she was subdued it was simply because she recognized in him, by intuition, one whom she could trust, and one mind, only, ruled both.

Another matter began to trouble him. How were they to get over the bed of mire at the foot of the hill? It was dangerous enough for him, and what of her?

He felt his helplessness, but saw only one way.

He paused at the point of danger.

"Can you cross?" he asked.

She gave a start.

"Of course!" she answered, with more spirit.

"Why not? I've been over many a time before."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE REFUGEE SEEKS REVENGE.

THERE was nothing in her confidence to awaken a like feeling in Vincent's mind.

"But it is dangerous," he urged.

The mad-woman laughed shortly, and suddenly leaving his side, began the passage. He was not quick enough to stop her, and, on the whole, was not sorry that she had gone. In any case he could not have given her assistance; that was out of the question.

He watched her eagerly, only to learn that she was capable of eclipsing him utterly. Much lighter as to weight, she was also light-footed and sure, and though the logs sunk and quivered under her, she went over in safety.

The secretary lost no time in following.

Brave as he was he did not like the task, but the trip was made without mishap.

The mad-woman was awaiting him on the further side.

"Now let us get away at once," he urged, remembering that Hodge and Tuck had guns, and looking back as he spoke.

"Out of the swamp."

"Isn't this my home?"

"Surely, you would not object to a better one?"

"Perhaps not," she answered, doubtfully.

"What is your name?"

She shook her head slowly.

"I don't know."

"What town did you live in?"

"I can't tell."

She put her hand to her head and slowly added:

"I don't think I have been just right here! I am not right now, but I am better than I was—except when I get excited."

Vincent was delighted to hear such rational answers.

"Go with me, and I will take you where you will be kindly used, and have a chance to get 'right'."

She looked at him searchingly.

"I feel sure I can trust you. You have a good face—a good face. I know when I see one. If I had had such when I was young, I might not now have been as I am. But it was never so. I lived in the mountains of Tennessee, and when my parents died and left me a mere child, I used to beg from door to door. How I got wrong here!"—she touched her forehead—"I don't know."

"What was your father's name?"

"I can't think; don't ask me to try. He was a mountain hunter, and was born in France, in the town of—of—"

She hesitated, and then sighed deeply.

"It's all gone," she added.

Disappointment and hope were alike felt by the secretary. She was so much better than when he and Veva saw her at Thornholm that there was a ray of hope of ultimate recovery. It occurred to him as peculiar that the sick man at Captain Norcross's cottage was of the same nationality as she claimed to be—French.

Of course, he decided, it could be only a coincidence.

They started away. She went wherever he said, and was as docile as ever, but there was a total absence of coherency and judgment in all she said and did.

Vincent was confronted with a problem of no small importance. He had taken charge of her, but what was he to do with her? He knew he could expect neither sympathy nor aid from Roland or Crapo, even if he had felt like appealing to them. Captain Ned Norcross had a big and kind heart, but was hardly the man for the place.

The secretary thought of Captain Hereford. He was honest, sympathetic, and rich. Plainly, he was just the man for the situation, if he would take charge, and to him Vincent resolved to go.

Not many minutes had elapsed when the strange pair came upon Roland. He was seated

on a log, with his hounds lying at his feet, resting after the hard tramp.

He looked in amazement at first, and then broke into a loud laugh.

"Upon my word, Vincent," he cried, "you've got bigger game than I can boast of."

"This is an unfortunate woman I have found in the swamp."

"She wears a novel style of dress," returned the planter, with an attempt at facetiousness.

"It is the apparel of adversity."

"Did you catch her in a trap?"

"She was on a sort of island over yonder—at least, it was a place cut off from the rest of the land by a treacherous bog. There is a high knoll—"

"I know the place. The Black Acre, it is called. That bog is a death-trap. The man who gets in its grasp is bound to sink to his doom. So of the sand, which you probably noticed. The Black Acre has had its sight at runaway slaves, and both negroes and white men have lost their lives in the man-hunts for them. Did you cross?"

"Yes."

"You were reckless. But did you see a hut on the top of the knoll?"

"Yes."

"It was built by two runaway slaves, about the time I was born. Few persons have seen it, but I'm one of them. The boards which cover the old wreck were stolen from plantations by the runaways I mentioned, board by board. Let me advise you to keep away from the Black Acre. You couldn't get many of the people who live near here to risk the passage of the bog; it is a death-trap, paved with dead men's bones."

Roland suddenly resumed his old manner, and added:

"But you got well repaid, this time. I like your prize! She's as sleek as my dogs!"

"She is deranged," returned Vincent, in annoyance, lowering his voice.

"Let's have some fun with her!"

"Sir?"

"Fire your gun, and see her scoot!"

"No; on the contrary, I propose to take her where she can be cared for properly."

"You must like scare-crows."

Roland's coarseness and inhumanity annoyed the secretary greatly, but he was prudent enough to keep control of his temper.

"I see in her an unfortunate woman; no more."

"I see a bundle of rags. Say, old woman, what artistic costumer of Paris concocted that rig of yours?"

The wanderer had been looking at Roland fixedly. She now shivered, and turned to Vincent.

"Send him away!" she implored. "I don't like him!"

Roland laughed loudly.

"Ain't she a trump card? I'd like to start her on a run and set the dogs after her!"

"I am sure you would not do that, Mr. Thornholm. Remember how wretched she is, and pity her as you would wish for pity under like conditions. She should be cared for suitably, and, to that end, I propose to take her to some place where it can be done."

"As you wish. I make no claim to her. It's lucky you, not I, found her; I'd have given the dogs some fun."

The planter's mind ran all in one channel. Pity was an emotion he never had, and his brute impulses always prevailed. Vincent regretted that circumstances obliged him to hear the fellow without offering any reproof.

The conversation was abruptly interrupted.

Several times the detective had glanced back to see if there was any sign of Hodge and Tuck. He had seen nothing, but the appearance of security was deceptive. The outlaws were at hand, and the fact was soon established emphatically.

They had gained sight of the group, and, burning with hatred for the man who had three times humiliated them, Drake Hodge leveled his gun, took careful aim and fired.

As the charge was heavy shot it was a wonder that he missed, but miss he did.

The leaden shower whistled past unpleasantly near, but without taking effect.

The bounds found their voices at once. The outlaws, true to their cowardly instincts, were already in retreat, and the dogs recognized lawful prey in them. So did Roland. Enraged at having been fired upon, he threw up his own gun and fired in return. A long bound on Hodge's part indicated that some of the shots had taken effect.

"After them, dogs; after them!" the planter cried; and he and the hounds rushed away in pursuit.

Vincent turned to look for the mad-woman. She had disappeared.

His gaze had been averted from her for only a few moments, but that had been sufficient time for her to get out of sight. No doubt, startled by the sound of the gun, she had at once fled precipitately, and the mossy carpet on the low land had deadened all her movements.

Vincent gave prompt pursuit. The exact course of her flight was uncertain, but he expected to gain sight of her by quick action. He

was disappointed. After running a few rods he looked about eagerly, but she was not visible. The heavy timber was all against him.

Then followed a vain search, which ended by his going back to meet Roland. The latter was returning in ill humor.

"They got away!" he growled.

"So has the mad-woman. Will you oblige me by putting the bounds on her trail, keeping them close to us so they can do her no damage?"

"No, I won't!" was the surly response. "I've had enough of two-legged game, and don't intend to fool around any more—though I do intend to get a whack at those outlaws again. As for your mad-woman, she is a mile away before now. Let her alone! Let us go for decent game!"

Roland's coarseness was all to the front. The thin varnish of civility he used when in society always fell away in the woods, and he stood forth in his proper colors. His ignorance, brutality and lawlessness asserted their rights.

Surly as he now was, none of it was leveled directly against Vincent. On the contrary, the latter was treated as an equal, rather than a subordinate, and for this the planter deserved one good mark.

Vincent saw that he could not prudently urge the point, and he reluctantly decided that the mad-woman must be abandoned to her fate, for the time, at least.

CHAPTER XV.

VINCENT HEARS WONDERFUL NEWS.

IN the week that followed there were no startling events.

Vincent searched for the mad-woman, but failed to find her. Reluctantly abandoning the attempt, he gave his attention to other matters. He made search in various places for articles he wished to find at Thornholm, but did not find them. The slow course which he was obliged to adopt annoyed him. As "Dangerous Dave" he had always liked to indulge in rapid action in a detective case. This case could not be hurried.

Captain Hereford passed much of his time in riding about the country, and did it so recklessly that it was generally remarked that the hero of Cerro Gordo would not long be able to endure dull country life.

Roland gave a little time to his studies, but not enough to help him much. His dogs and his gun interested him most of all, but he was not forgetful of Berenice; and he often called there.

Edward Crapo made a visit to Washington, and on his return, repaid the money borrowed of Roland. Then he fell to reading the Life of Napoleon with fresh zeal.

One day Vincent received by a messenger a note in well-known writing. He opened it and read as follows:

"DEAR R—: I beg that you will come to the house as soon as possible. Something strange, wonderful and joyful has occurred, and no time is to be lost. We shall all watch for you. Come! Yours, lovingly,
NINA."

The secretary read with some surprise and a good deal of wonder. What did it mean? Nina was not one to go into raptures over nothing, or to use extravagant language. There must be some basis for her assertion, but what it was he could not surmise.

Had the papers which he so much coveted been found elsewhere?

This seemed hardly possible, but, as he was wholly at liberty, he decided to lose no time in obeying the call.

The initial "R" in the note was no perplexity. There had been a time, when he lived under the old sailor's roof, that he was known as Robert Norcross, and by that name he was still best known to his friends, even when he assumed the name of Walter Vincent.

He made the journey through the swamp.

Afterward, he recalled the fact that he had no premonition of what was about to occur. The day was pleasant, and he experienced a new degree of cheerfulness in consequence—that was all.

When he reached the cottage the ex-sailor was sitting on the threshold, calmly smoking, and his bronzed face lighted up at sight of his favorite.

"Here I am again, captain!" the secretary saluted, heartily. "How do I find you?"

Captain Ned arose. He took the visitor's hand in his big, rough palm and squeezed it heartily. It seemed as if he would never get enough of that hand-shake, but not a word passed his lips. Some emotion moved him strongly, and, as Vincent noticed the quivering of his old friend's bearded lips, he began to be alarmed.

"Is anything wrong, captain?" he demanded.

Still Ned Norcross said nothing, but he pushed Vincent through the door with positive violence. Then he walked off rapidly.

"Shoot me for an idiot!" he growled fiercely, "but I'd have blubbered like a big baby if I hadn't got rid of the boy!"

In the meanwhile Vincent had entered the cottage only to find Nina's arms clasped around his neck, and the embrace was as warm and long-continued as the captain's hand-shake. A tear, too, fell upon the visitor's hand.

"My dear sister!" he cried in alarm, "what is wrong?"

"Nothing! Nothing, only I am happy."

"What has happened?"

"Sit down with me!"

He obeyed, and her face still told of unusual emotion. Her eyes were moist, and she clung to him with fresh demonstrations of affection.

"You perplex me, Nina," he exclaimed.

"Do I, brother? You shall be enlightened. We have had a strange life. Do you remember it all?"

"All except what occurred when I was too young to remember."

"The rest you know from hearsay. You know how good Captain Norcross, being in Cuba when the yellow fever began to abate, found us there, two infants, and I but a week old; and was told that our parents had both died of the fever. You know how his big heart, and that of his noble wife, warmed to us; how, learning that we were friendless and in a land of strangers, they took charge of us, adopted us, and brought us away."

"Yes; but, Nina—"

"You know how we were reared on the seashore, and we grew up to call the captain and his wife our father and our mother—grew up true children of the coast, fishing, rowing boats, and getting our education as best we could."

"Proceed!" was the patient direction.

"You know," Nina went on, "how, in time, you grew ambitious, and, becoming a detective, was so successful, and so dreaded by criminals, that you gained the sobriquet of 'Dangerous Dave'; and—"

"Pass over that, Nina!"

"Then, when you had become famous, you resolved to go to Cuba and see if you could learn more about our parentage—"

"Yes; and I went!" Vincent interrupted, with sudden energy, "but it was not idle curiosity that sent me there. Before that I had met Maggie Warner. At the very first she regarded me closely, and she finally advanced and asked if I was related to the Thornholms, of Virginia."

"Her manner was so strange that I finally told her how I had been a waif of the hospital in Cuba. She asked for the date, and, when I gave it, uttered a sharp cry and nearly swooned. It was long before I secured a coherent statement from her, but I had it, at last."

"Some twenty years before she had been hired as nurse to an infant boy called Roland Thornholm. His father was Edward Crapo; his mother had been Rosalind Thornholm before her marriage; and the boy had been given her family name at his grandfather's request."

"The Crapos, the child and Maggie Warner journeyed to Cuba. There Mrs. Crapo fell ill with yellow fever. What did her husband do? He hastily deserted her and her child, at once, and ran away."

"Maggie Warner was bolder. She remained awhile, and saw her mistress taken into the hospital. The boy went with her. And in the hospital a second child was born—a girl."

"All the while the fever raged, Maggie was young; she was afraid of the fever. Who would not have been? She, too, ran away. I do not blame her. She, with no tie of blood, had stayed longer than the cowardly husband who had deserted his own family."

"She embarked in the first vessel she could get; it took her to her old home, England. She stayed there a score of years, beset with remorse for her desertion, and then returned to Virginia, from which place she had never heard a word."

"Soon after her arrival she met me. She saw the Thornholm resemblance; she accosted me; her story followed."

"You know how it stirred me up. I resolved to go to Cuba; I went. When Captain Norcross took you and me away, Nina, we were nameless. The record on the book simply referred to our mother as, 'Unknown woman, died leaving two children.'"

"Hastening to Cuba I found and examined the record-book. Under the first entry was a second. I remember its words well."

"Her name was Rosalind Thornholm Crapo, residence unknown. In the confusion of the plague, incorrect certificates of her death, and of the boy, were sent, in response to a letter of inquiry, to Edward Crapo, Savannah, Georgia, U. S. A. This was because her identity was temporarily confused with that of a Mrs. Rebecca Swan, and her son, Amos, both of whom died. The names of the latter were learned, later. Mrs. Crapo arose in delirium, left the hospital and was drowned in the sea. Her son, and a daughter who was born in the hospital, were given away to a gentleman and his wife, by a nurse, before the plague abated, and while all was yet confusion."

"Such was the second record," Vincent pursued, with a deep breath, "but it was enough to stir me up thoroughly. I returned to Virginia, learned where Thornholm Lodge was, and inquired who lived there."

"I found Edward Crapo surrounded with luxury, and a young man reputed to be his son at the head of the house."

"Then I knew the depth of his infamy. Not only had he deserted his wife and child in a base and cowardly way, but, beyond doubt, when he received the incorrect certificates of death, he

had determined to hold Thornholm at all hazards."

"Knowing that I was the true heir, I determined to defeat him. I—but this talk is idle. Enough that I went there in a guise of innocence, determined to search the whole house for papers to prove my claim."

"As Crapo really believed me dead, as well as his wife, he would have no motive in destroying any valuable document except the certificate of his son's death, and that would be no loss to me."

"Maggie Warner described the house and told me where the papers would be likely to be kept. I went; I have searched; I have found nothing!"

Vincent had spoken rapidly and earnestly.

He had become filled with the excitement of one who has a great purpose at heart, and had forgotten all else while he talked.

But, as he paused, calmer thoughts came to him.

"I have wandered from the subject. Why did you introduce it, Nina? What is this mystery?"

Nina tightened her hold upon him.

"Are you prepared for a great surprise?"

"Certainly, if it is a pleasant one. Have valuable papers been found?"

"It is not that."

"What, then?"

"It was a mistake when a certificate of your death was made out, twenty years ago."

"Most certainly."

"Did it ever occur to you that another error might have occurred?"

"Another! Why do you speak so strangely?"

"Walter, be prepared for a great revelation. There was one erroneous certificate of death—"

She raised her head and looked him in the face.

His color changed perceptibly.

"Surely, you don't, you can't mean—"

"What if the other certificate was wrong, too?"

"Our mother's!" cried Vincent, with a great start.

"Even so."

"But you don't mean—it is impossible—"

"Walter, our mother is alive!"

Nina had prepared him as carefully as possible, but the color went out of his face and his expression was startled and bewildered.

"Alive and here!" the sister added.

"Impossible!"

"But it is so. Rosalind Thornholm Crapo lives! Her own lips have stated the fact, and Maggie Warner had seen and recognized her. Even now Maggie is caring for her in the next room—for our mother is ill. She came here in most wretched rags, and seriously afflicted mentally. She was deranged, though not strictly insane."

"A mad-woman?" cried Vincent, with a fresh start.

CHAPTER XVI.

STRANGELY REUNITED.

NINA hastened to reassure him.

"She is not mad, now."

"But she was—"

"Good Captain Norcross, always our guardian angel, found her unconscious in the edge of the wood. Hunger and hardship had so worn upon her that she had swooned from sheer exhaustion. The captain brought her here. Walter, she was the most wretched object I ever saw. She was a mere bundle of rags, outwardly; you don't know how bad her condition was!"

"I can guess!" uttered Vincent, deeply.

"We put her in bed and sent for a doctor. He at once said that she had been out of her mind, but was in a fair way of recovery. That was yesterday."

"When Maggie and I had made her as neat and clean as if she had been our dearest friend, instead of a lonely wanderer, Maggie surprised me by looking at her long and hard. I asked why she did it."

"Child," she answered, "if you want to know how your own mother would look, if she were alive, old, gray and unfortunate, gaze at this woman. She looks strangely like her!"

"I did not give the matter much thought, then, but she continued to look intently at the unconscious woman. Finally, she asked me if you made sure, in Cuba, that our mother died. Then she brought out the infant's garments you had worn at the hospital and, pointing to the initial 'R. T.' on one of them, added:

"I am going to show her that when she regains consciousness. Rosalind Thornholm worked those letters with her own hands, and if this poor creature is she—"

"Maggie did not finish the sentence, but her mind remained busy, as I could see, and her suspicion increased."

"I confess that I thought her idea impossible."

"All night our wanderer lay insensible. Maggie and I cared for her by turns. This morning she awoke. The little garments were not necessary to bring back her recollection—she awoke in her right mind."

"And then?" questioned Vincent, eagerly.

"She announced herself as Rosalind Thornholm Crapo, without prompting from us!"

"And she is here now?"

"Yes. The doctor has come again, and he thinks that, with due care, she will never have further mental trouble, adding that she must have been nearing the point of sanity for some time."

"I am not able to believe it."

"But she is as calm and rational as you are. She remembers absolutely nothing since she went into the hospital, twenty years ago, but, before that, all is clear. She and Maggie talk of old times. Each is sure of the other's identity. How can you doubt?"

"And she has been—"

"We are compelled to believe she has been an insane wanderer for over twenty years!"

"Have you dared to tell her anything?"

"We have told her all! Her first anxiety was for her children. When we had assured her that they were alive and well, the greater part was told; the rest was easy. She was weak bodily, but remarkably calm. More than that, she is waiting to see her son!"

"Can she bear it?"

"Why not, if she has borne what has gone before?"

"You are right. Let me see her; the sooner the better."

"I will go in at once. Maggie is caring for her."

Nina moved accordingly, and disappeared in the other room.

Vincent was left startled, wondering and confused; but one idea was strong in his mind: he believed that, when he saw the sick woman, it would not be any unfamiliar face.

His sister soon returned, accompanied by Maggie Warner. The latter's eyes were filled with tears.

"Go in, Walter!" Nina directed, gently.

He went. His first glance at the occupant of the bed revealed all that he had suspected; he saw the mad-woman of the Black Acre!

A great change had taken place in her. The soiled, ragged garments of old had given place to radical neatness; the once-disheveled hair was carefully combed; and, best of all, the light of reason was in the late wanderer's eyes, and they were turned upon the strong young man with motherly tenderness and longing.

Nina and Maggie waited outside. The latter had seized every suitable chance to weep tears of remorse during the last few hours, and she had another siege then. She could not forgive herself for the desertion in Cuba; it had been a sting to her for twenty years and more; it remained a sting even in the time of reunion.

Many minutes passed before Vincent opened the door. When he did, he silently beckoned to Nina.

She went to him; he took her hand and they knelt by the bedside; the sick woman placed her hands upon their heads, and for a long while all was silence.

Later, brother and sister arose. It would not do for their mother to talk to any great degree, but she was far stronger than was to be expected, and there was much that her son was anxious to say.

One subject he avoided. The blank of twenty years remained complete with Mrs. Crapo. She had no recollection of the scene at the Black Acre, nor any suspicion that she had before seen her son since she parted from him in Cuba.

Vincent felt that it was a merciful fact that it was so.

The wronged wife knew the exact state of affairs at Thornholm—knew that another woman occupied her rightful place, and that a false master ruled instead of her son.

It was easy to understand that Edward Crapo, believing that the real Roland had died in Cuba, had in some way secured a substitute, in order to hold Thornholm illegally. The youth of the two boys at the time, and long absence, had enabled him to work the scheme successfully.

Mrs. Crapo became interested in Vincent's attempt to gain possession of the marriage-certificate, and other papers. Of course, no one would, or could, deny the marriage, but the contesting parties would go into court with a much stronger case if they had the certificate and other family documents.

If Edward Crapo had preserved the certificate of his son's death, it would help to prove the present Roland an usurper, and that he had was not impossible.

History was full of cases where criminals allowed damaging evidence to exist, and Crapo had an object in preserving that paper.

By means of it he could hold a rod of terror over the bogus Roland's head, and defeat any desire on the latter's part to eject him from Thornholm.

Mrs. Crapo heard of the vain search of the old cabinet and grew thoughtful.

"Maggie's idea that the papers might be in the cabinet was not good," she declared. "Old documents always were kept there, as she says, but that is just the reason why Mr. Crapo would not put what he knew to be so dangerous there."

"That occurred to me," returned Vincent.

"Were you ever in his private room?"

"No."

"Did you ever glance in?"
 "Not even that."
 "In the old days he had a trunk in which he kept all of his valuables. He always kept it locked, and allowed no one to open or look into it. It is true that many years have passed, but I believe that his old ways prevail, and that whatever he has of a delicate nature is still kept there."
 "I remember, now, that he always locks his room when he leaves it."
 "That looks suggestive."
 "So it does; and I will visit the room."
 "How can you do it?"
 "I will find some way."
 "Don't betray yourself."
 "Rest assured, I will not."
 "I think the trunk will be found the proper clew. How this talk brings back the past! And so you visited the old portrait-room?"
 "Yes."
 "And saw our ancestors looking down upon you?"
 "Yes."

"I wish I could go there!"
 Vincent saw that the matter was taking too strong a hold upon her mind, and the increase of color in her face betokened weariness. He prudently left her alone with Nina, after directing that conversation be dropped for awhile. After an affectionate parting he left the room.

Captain Norcross had returned to his favorite seat on the threshold, and was smoking his pipe, but he put the latter away when the detective seized his hand and shook it warmly.

"Noble old friend!" Vincent exclaimed, "you are the guardian angel of my family. Long ago you found my sister and myself in the worst of situations, and brought us out of it gradually. Now, my mother would have died in the swamp only for you. May all blessings—"

"There, there, there! Don't say a word! Stop it! Am I a pirate, that I should fire on a wreck? No; no more than I'm a guardian angel. I, an angel! Pshaw, pshaw, boy! Look at my face and hands! The one is red enough for a beacon light; the other big enough for a boat's sail. No more praise, now. Stop it! Dash it, boy, you weaken me!"

The old sailor jammed his hard knuckles into his eyes, and took the hand away wet with salt water that welled from his honest heart.

Vincent knew his benefactor well, and allowed the rest to go unsaid.

They had just taken seats when a voice arose from the southwest room.

"My crazy Frenchman!" exclaimed Norcross.

"Isn't he well, yet?"

"No; though he ought to be, and would have been, had he been less rattle-pated. His fever was near its turn when he got up and pounded his head against the wall, and generally knocked himself around until he got a bad set-back. Now, the only wonder is that he is alive."

"Have you learned his name?"

"No, nor anything else."

"Strange!"

"I am running quite a hospital!" quoth Captain Ned. "Two patients on our hands already. I hope no more will come, though I'll take them in if they are of the right sort."

The voice in the other room grew loud and angry.

"I must quiet the chap," Norcross added. "Will you come in?"

"Yes."

Vincent followed.

On the bed lay a man who, plainly, was having a hard fight to preserve his life, yet an unconscious one. He had not had a lucid interval since he was brought to the cottage.

He was of middle age, with very black hair and beard, and his face had once been swarthy, but was then a strange combination of pallor and fever-flush. He was a desperately sick man, and his very name was unknown.

"Let me at him!" he suddenly cried; "he's the villain who struck me with the knife!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SECRETARY RECEIVES WARNING.

THE man's manner was wild, but Captain Norcross answered, soothingly:

"The fellow is gone, messmate, and you are all right. The danger is over; rest easy!"

A few words in French his patient muttered, and then grew quiet.

"He's seen stormy times," the ex-sailor added.

"How is the knife-wound?"

"Doing finely. It was a deep slash, but he is pulling out in good style. If he had been attended to right after he was wounded, he would have had no trouble, but he was about gone when I discovered him floating down the river on the driftwood. The night before had been bright and moonlit half through, but a raw spring rain came up, and I make no doubt he lay soaking in it, on the driftwood, all the while. He was half-frozen when I rowed out and took him off, into my boat."

"You still think he was the victim of attempted assassination?"

"There can't be a doubt of it. He lets it out in his muttering, and the knife-cut speaks for itself."

"How do you think he came to be on the driftwood?"

"Nobody can say. Maybe he was flung into the river, and struck the wood, unknown to the murderer."

"If I had no other work, I would like this case for detective service."

"I sometimes fear I've done wrong not to report it to the authorities, but, as I told you at the start, once let him get his senses and he can tell us all, while, if I publish it abroad now, the guilty man will have a chance to escape."

"I pity this fellow."

"Naturally; but his is not a good face. He has been a man of strong passions."

The sick man stirred suddenly.

"Out of the way!" he cried. "No man shall block my path. Ha! I see you object; you mean to kill me! Back, I say! The knife! Coward, coward!"

He started up in delirious fear, but Norcross gently forced him back to the pillow.

"Be easy, shipmate; be easy! Your enemy is gone, and you are all right. Be calm!"

He had great influence over the unknown, and again the latter yielded. Norcross mixed a powder which he drank without remonstrance.

"He will soon be still," the ex-sailor added. "I hope he will wake from some of his sleeps in good condition, for I admit I don't like acting as nurse."

"You are proceeding with your usual self-sacrificing spirit, and I hope your patient will be duly grateful, if he ever recovers."

"The doctor thinks he will pull through."

"Well, captain, I will leave you now; it is not prudent for me to be away from Thornholm longer. I need not ask you to guard your charges well, for I know your nature."

"I'll do my best, my boy."

They left the room, parted by the cottage, and Vincent hastened away. His step was lighter than it had been for many days.

At last, he had a mother, if not a father.

As he went he mused upon the strange chance that had made him the protector of that mother when she was so sorely afflicted and miserable. Little had he thought, then, that he was befriending one to whom he owed natural allegiance.

He was going along in a mood of exhilaration and thankfulness when he had a new thought which brought him to an abrupt stop.

His expression became one of consternation—he had suddenly thought of Veva Crapo.

Before, his conscience had reproached him because he was seeking to drive her father and mother away from Thornholm. How was it now? The case had become a thousand-fold worse.

The Mrs. Crapo of Norcross cottage was Edward's only legal wife; Veva called the second Mrs. Crapo mother!

No wonder, with his deep respect and affection for Veva, that the secretary's strong face trembled with emotion as he stood there alone in the swamp.

"Merciful heavens!" he muttered, "it will kill her!"

It was long before he stirred from his position. Time passed unheeded. He was seeking for some way by which to save, to spare the girl. At the very start he knew that there was no way—none, except to abandon the war against Crapo.

At last he was ready—even eager—to do it, as far as he was concerned alone, but he thought of his mother and her wrongs.

"It cannot be! The work must go on. It is a terrible thing for Veva, but I am helpless. Above all else earthly I owe allegiance to my mother. I will go on; I'll harden my heart; the innocent must suffer with the guilty!"

Setting his face in a stern frown he resumed his way, but the hardening process did not progress rapidly.

When he reached Thornholm he told a servant that he was ill and went to his room. He did not emerge until the next morning.

He had been engaged in a hard fight with himself, and the result was outward composure. He knew that there could be no turning back, and he had determined to treat Veva with reserved politeness.

Struggle as he would he must break her heart later. There was no help for it. All he could do was to learn to be indifferent.

Soon after breakfast he received word by way of a slave from Roland that he would not be wanted that day, as the latter had gone on a hunt.

Vincent made a decision at once. From that time he ought to, and would, avoid Veva, and the easiest way to do it was to absent himself as much as possible.

On the present occasion he would go for a walk to the northwest, in the direction of the Royalston plantation.

Fate is often capricious. It was so on this occasion. The secretary was rapidly crossing the grounds beyond the mansion when he came face to face with Veva.

She had rarely looked prettier. A becoming flush was in her face, and her dress was strikingly becoming. Vincent saw all this, but did

not waver—he would be frigid, and leave her as soon as possible.

Again Fate baffled him. Veva did not know of his intentions. She had made a shapely wreath, crown-shaped, from the leaves of the old trees, and, being in high spirits, suddenly pounced upon him.

"Would you be greater than Napoleon?" she demanded, lightly. "With all his power of years he was without a crown in his last days. See!—you are his superior; you wear a crown!"

The secretary had politely removed his hat to greet her, and before he could divine her intentions, she had put the crown on his head and stood smiling brightly, mischievously into his face.

How Vincent would have met this little artifice can never be known. It was most untimely done.

Edward Crapo had been sauntering along a path, unconscious that any one was near him. He turned a group of shrubbery and saw, not the impulsive way in which all had been done, but the result.

There stood Veva and the secretary, face to face, and apparently on very friendly terms of equality, and Mr. Crapo was impressed with the idea that he had never seen a more pronounced love-scene.

He cleared his throat ominously; they turned and saw him.

Veva snatched off the unlucky crown as impulsively as she had put it on, and her face flushed anew.

"Miss Crapo," said Edward, with cold composure, "I think your mother wishes to see you in the house!"

Veva stammered in her reply. If she had not been inclined, now that it was over, to regard the affair as foolish, his icy reminder put it on a worse footing. She knew what was in his mind; she knew there was trouble ahead for her.

Before she had recovered from her confusion she was on her way to the mansion with Crapo, and the secretary was left alone.

Annoyed by the mishap, the latter kept on his way and carried out his previous plans. He expected to hear from the affair again, and he did.

Soon after his return he was informed by a negro that Mr. Crapo requested his presence in the library. He went at once. The elder gentleman was perusing the Life of Napoleon, but he laid it aside with deliberate calmness.

"The day is fine, Mr. Vincent," he remarked.

"Yes, sir," answered the secretary, with equal calmness.

"Doubtless, you have been for a walk?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thornholm is a fine property."

"It is, indeed."

"Miss Royalston is to be congratulated on securing such a home by marrying Roland."

"Thornholm can hardly be excelled."

"My daughter, however, will be about as well provided for, later."

Vincent could not fail to understand the gradual advance.

"Yes, sir," he again answered.

"She is to marry John Jay Lennox."

"Lennox has a fine plantation."

"Very. Veva's marriage to him will be very suitable, both being of old families and noble blood. The Thornholm and Lennox wealth is about a stand-off."

Really, it was amusing to see the cool effrontery of the student of Napoleon. Almost penniless, himself, Veva must go to Lennox without a dollar, if she went at all, but her father ignored the fact calmly.

"My daughter is young," he pursued, in an even voice, "and not always wise. You will excuse me if I say she proved this in the episode of to-day. I refer to the absurd crown."

"Yes?"

"Yes, Mr. Vincent. Considering that she is the pledged wife of Lennox, she was very thoughtless to act as she did. True, she is a natural coquette, but I strongly disapprove of her course."

"I think no harm was done, sir," quietly returned Vincent, anxious to avert a storm, for Veva's sake.

"I hope not. You, Mr. Vincent, are older than my daughter. You must see the difference in your worldly position and hers. You are poor; she is an heiress!"

Again the marvelous impudence of assertion, but it fell upon impregnable armor.

"I fully realize it, sir."

"No doubt you are fond of her; we all are. But, pray, sir, do not indulge her coquetry. Your manhood demands that you do not let her make sport of you. Women, Mr. Vincent, are merciless in their flirtations; their sense of honor is purely artificial, not natural, like man's!"

Mr. Crapo looked at his slender hands as if conscious that their whiteness arose from the fact that they were clean, morally.

"I see, sir," placidly answered the secretary.

"Veva, being as good as Lennox's wife, must not coquet with any other man. Of course you agree with me, sir?"

"All you have said shows fatherly care and solicitude, as well as worldly wisdom."

"Nothing! Nothing, only I am happy."

"What has happened?"

"Sit down with me!"

He obeyed, and her face still told of unusual emotion. Her eyes were moist, and she clung to him with fresh demonstrations of affection.

"You perplex me, Nina," he exclaimed.

"Do I, brother? You shall be enlightened. We have had a strange life. Do you remember it all?"

"All except what occurred when I was too young to remember."

"The rest you know from hearsay. You know how good Captain Norcross, being in Cuba when the yellow fever began to abate, found us there, two infants, and I but a week old; and was told that our parents had both died of the fever. You know how his big heart, and that of his noble wife, warmed to us; how, learning that we were friendless and in a land of strangers, they took charge of us, adopted us, and brought us away."

"Yes; but, Nina—"

"You know how we were reared on the seashore, and we grew up to call the captain and his wife our father and our mother—grew up true children of the coast, fishing, rowing boats, and getting our education as best we could."

"Proceed!" was the patient direction.

"You know," Nina went on, "how, in time, you grew ambitious, aud, becoming a detective, was so successful, and so dreaded by criminals, that you gained the sobriquet of 'Dangerous Dave'; and—"

"Pass over that, Nina!"

"Then, when you had become famous, you resolved to go to Cuba and see if you could learn more about our parentage—"

"Yes; and I went!" Vincent interrupted, with sudden energy, "but it was not idle curiosity that sent me there. Before that I had met Maggie Warner. At the very first she regarded me closely, and she finally advanced and asked if I was related to the Thornholms, of Virginia."

"Her manner was so strange that I finally told her how I had been a waif of the hospital in Cuba. She asked for the date, and, when I gave it, uttered a sharp cry and nearly swooned. It was long before I secured a coherent statement from her, but I had it, at last."

"Some twenty years before she had been hired as nurse to an infant boy called Roland Thornholm. His father was Edward Crapo; his mother had been Rosalind Thornholm before her marriage; and the boy had been given her family name at his grandfather's request."

"The Crapos, the child and Maggie Warner journeyed to Cuba. There Mrs. Crapo fell ill with yellow fever. What did her husband do? He hastily deserted her and her child, at once, and ran away."

"Maggie Warner was bolder. She remained awhile, and saw her mistress taken into the hospital. The boy went with her. And in the hospital a second child was born—a girl."

"All the while the fever raged, Maggie was young; she was afraid of the fever. Who would not have been? She, too, ran away. I do not blame her. She, with no tie of blood, had stayed longer than the cowardly husband who had deserted his own family."

"She embarked in the first vessel she could get; it took her to her old home, England. She stayed there a score of years, beset with remorse for her desertion, and then returned to Virginia, from which place she had never heard a word."

"Soon after her arrival she met me. She saw the Thornholm resemblance; she accosted me; her story followed."

"You know how it stirred me up. I resolved to go to Cuba; I went. When Captain Norcross took you and me away, Nina, we were nameless. The record on the book simply referred to our mother as, 'Unknown woman, died leaving two children.'"

"Hastening to Cuba I found and examined the record-book. Under the first entry was a second. I remember its words well."

"Her name was Rosalind Thornholm Crapo, residence unknown. In the confusion of the plague, incorrect certificates of her death, and of the boy, were sent, in response to a letter of inquiry, to Edward Crapo, Savannah, Georgia, U. S. A. This was because her identity was temporarily confused with that of a Mrs. Rebecca Swan, and her son, Amos, both of whom died. The names of the latter were learned, later. Mrs. Crapo arose in delirium, left the hospital and was drowned in the sea. Her son, and a daughter who was born in the hospital, were given away to a gentleman and his wife, by a nurse, before the plague abated, and while all was yet confusion."

"Such was the second record," Vincent pursued, with a deep breath, "but it was enough to stir me up thoroughly. I returned to Virginia, learned where Thornholm Lodge was, and inquired who lived there."

"I found Edward Crapo surrounded with luxury, and a young man reputed to be his son at the head of the house."

"Then I knew the depth of his infamy. Not only had he deserted his wife and child in a base and cowardly way, but, beyond doubt, when he received the incorrect certificates of death, he

had determined to hold Thornholm at all hazards."

"Knowing that I was the true heir, I determined to defeat him. I—but this talk is idle. Enough that I went there in a guise of innocence, determined to search the whole house for papers to prove my claim."

"As Crapo really believed me dead, as well as his wife, he would have no motive in destroying any valuable document except the certificate of his son's death, and that would be no loss to me."

"Maggie Warner described the house and told me where the papers would be likely to be kept. I went; I have searched; I have found nothing!"

Vincent had spoken rapidly and earnestly.

He had become filled with the excitement of one who has a great purpose at heart, and had forgotten all else while he talked.

But, as he paused, calmer thoughts came to him.

"I have wandered from the subject. Why did you introduce it, Nina? What is this mystery?"

Nina tightened her hold upon him.

"Are you prepared for a great surprise?"

"Certainly, if it is a pleasant one. Have valuable papers been found?"

"It is not that."

"What, then?"

"It was a mistake when a certificate of your death was made out, twenty years ago."

"Most certainly."

"Did it ever occur to you that another error might have occurred?"

"Another! Why do you speak so strangely?"

"Walter, be prepared for a great revelation. There was one erroneous certificate of death—"

She raised her head and looked him in the face.

His color changed perceptibly.

"Surely, you don't, you can't mean—"

"What if the other certificate was wrong, too?"

"Our mother's!" cried Vincent, with a great start.

"Even so."

"But you don't mean—it is impossible—"

"Walter, our mother is alive!"

Nina had prepared him as carefully as possible, but the color went out of his face and his expression was startled and bewildered.

"Alive and here!" the sister added.

"Impossible!"

"But it is so. Rosalind Thornholm Crapo lives! Her own lips have stated the fact, and Maggie Warner had seen and recognized her. Even now Maggie is caring for her in the next room—for our mother is ill. She came here in most wretched rags, and seriously afflicted mentally. She was deranged, though not strictly insane."

"A mad-woman?" cried Vincent, with a fresh start.

CHAPTER XVI.

STRANGELY REUNITED.

NINA hastened to reassure him.

"She is not mad, now."

"But she was—"

"Good Captain Norcross, always our guardian angel, found her unconscious in the edge of the wood. Hunger and hardship had so worn upon her that she had swooned from sheer exhaustion. The captain brought her here. Walter, she was the most wretched object I ever saw. She was a mere bundle of rags, outwardly; you don't know how bad her condition was!"

"I can guess!" uttered Vincent, deeply.

"We put her in bed and sent for a doctor. He at once said that she had been out of her mind, but was in a fair way of recovery. That was yesterday."

"When Maggie and I had made her as neat and clean as if she had been our dearest friend, instead of a lonely wanderer, Maggie surprised me by looking at her long and hard. I asked why she did it."

"Child," she answered, 'if you want to know how your own mother would look, if she were alive, old, gray and unfortunate, gaze at this woman. She looks strangely like her!'

"I did not give the matter much thought, then, but she continued to look intently at the unconscious woman. Finally, she asked me if you made sure, in Cuba, that our mother died. Then she brought out the infant's garments you had worn at the hospital and, pointing to the initial 'R. T.' on one of them, added:

"I am going to show her that when she regains consciousness. Rosalind Thornholm worked those letters with her own hands, and if this poor creature is she—"

"Maggie did not finish the sentence, but her mind remained busy, as I could see, and her suspicion increased."

"I confess that I thought her idea impossible."

"All night our wanderer lay insensible. Maggie and I cared for her by turns. This morning she awoke. The little garments were not necessary to bring back her recollection—she awoke in her right mind."

"And then?" questioned Vincent, eagerly.

"She announced herself as Rosalind Thornholm Crapo, without prompting from us!"

"And she is here now?"

"Yes. The doctor has come again, and he thinks that, with due care, she will never have further mental trouble, adding that she must have been nearing the point of sanity for some time."

"I am not able to believe it."

"But she is as calm and rational as you are. She remembers absolutely nothing since she went into the hospital, twenty years ago, but, before that, all is clear. She and Maggie talk of old times. Each is sure of the other's identity. How can you doubt?"

"And she has been—"

"We are compelled to believe she has been an insane wanderer for over twenty years!"

"Have you dared to tell her anything?"

"We have told her all! Her first anxiety was for her children. When we had assured her that they were alive and well, the greater part was told; the rest was easy. She was weak bodily, but remarkably calm. More than that, she is waiting to see her son!"

"Can she hear it?"

"Why not, if she has borne what has gone before?"

"You are right. Let me see her; the sooner the better."

"I will go in at once. Maggie is caring for her."

Nina moved accordingly, and disappeared in the other room.

Vincent was left startled, wondering and confused; but one idea was strong in his mind: he believed that, when he saw the sick woman, it would not be any unfamiliar face.

His sister soon returned, accompanied by Maggie Warner. The latter's eyes were filled with tears.

"Go in, Walter!" Nina directed, gently.

He went. His first glance at the occupant of the bed revealed all that he had suspected; he saw the mad-woman of the Black Acre!

A great change had taken place in her. The soiled, ragged garments of old had given place to radical neatness; the once-disheveled hair was carefully combed; and, best of all, the light of reason was in the late wanderer's eyes, and they were turned upon the strong young man with motherly tenderness and longing.

Nina and Maggie waited outside. The latter had seized every suitable chance to weep tears of remorse during the last few hours, and she had another siege then. She could not forgive herself for the desertion in Cuba; it had been a sting to her for twenty years and more; it remained a sting even in the time of reunion.

Many minutes passed before Vincent opened the door. When he did, he silently beckoned to Nina.

She went to him; he took her hand and they knelt by the bedside; the sick woman placed her hands upon their heads, and for a long while all was silence.

Later, brother and sister arose. It would not do for their mother to talk to any great degree, but she was far stronger than was to be expected, and there was much that her son was anxious to say.

One subject he avoided. The blank of twenty years remained complete with Mrs. Crapo. She had no recollection of the scene at the Black Acre, nor any suspicion that she had before seen her son since she parted from him in Cuba. Vincent felt that it was a merciful fact that it was so.

The wronged wife knew the exact state of affairs at Thornholm—knew that another woman occupied her rightful place, and that a false master ruled instead of her son.

It was easy to understand that Edward Crapo, believing that the real Roland had died in Cuba, had in some way secured a substitute, in order to hold Thornholm illegally. The youth of the two boys at the time, and long absence, had enabled him to work the scheme successfully.

Mrs. Crapo became interested in Vincent's attempt to gain possession of the marriage-certificate, and other papers. Of course, no one would, or could, deny the marriage, but the contesting parties would go into court with a much stronger case if they had the certificate and other family documents.

If Edward Crapo had preserved the certificate of his son's death, it would help to prove the present Roland an usurper, and that he had was not impossible.

History was full of cases where criminals allowed damaging evidence to exist, and Crapo had an object in preserving that paper.

By means of it he could hold a rod of terror over the bogus Roland's head, and defeat any desire on the latter's part to eject him from Thornholm.

Mrs. Crapo heard of the vain search of the old cabinet and grew thoughtful.

"Maggie's idea that the papers might be in the cabinet was not good," she declared. "Old documents always were kept there, as she says, but that is just the reason why Mr. Crapo would not put what he knew to be so dangerous there."

"That occurred to me," returned Vincent.

"Were you ever in his private room?"

"No."

"Did you ever glance in?"
 "Not even that."
 "In the old days he had a trunk in which he kept all of his valuables. He always kept it locked, and allowed no one to open or look into it. It is true that many years have passed, but I believe that his old ways prevail, and that whatever he has of a delicate nature is still kept there."

"I remember, now, that he always locks his room when he leaves it."

"That looks suggestive."

"So it does; and I will visit the room."

"How can you do it?"

"I will find some way."

"Don't betray yourself."

"Rest assured, I will not."

"I think the trunk will be found the proper clew. How this talk brings back the past! And so you visited the old portrait-room?"

"Yes."

"And saw our ancestors looking down upon you?"

"Yes."

"I wish I could go there!"

Vincent saw that the matter was taking too strong a hold upon her mind, and the increase of color in her face betokened weariness. He prudently left her alone with Nina, after directing that conversation be dropped for awhile. After an affectionate parting he left the room.

Captain Norcross had returned to his favorite seat on the threshold, and was smoking his pipe, but he put the latter away when the detective seized his hand and shook it warmly.

"Noble old friend!" Vincent exclaimed, "you are the guardian angel of my family. Long ago you found my sister and myself in the worst of situations, and brought us out of it gradually. Now, my mother would have died in the swamp only for you. May all blessings—"

"There, there, there! Don't say a word! Stop it! Am I a pirate, that I should fire on a wreck? No; no more than I'm a guardian angel. I, an angel? Pshaw, pshaw, boy! Look at my face and hands! The one is red enough for a beacon light; the other big enough for a boat's sail. No more praise, now. Stop it! Dash it, boy, you weaken me!"

The old sailor jammed his hard knuckles into his eyes, and took the hand away wet with salt water that welled from his honest heart.

Vincent knew his benefactor well, and allowed the rest to go unsaid.

They had just taken seats when a voice arose from the southwest room.

"My crazy Frenchman!" exclaimed Norcross.

"Isn't he well, yet?"

"No; though he ought to be, and would have been, had he been less rattle-pated. His fever was near its turn when he got up and pounded his head against the wall, and generally knocked himself around until he got a bad set-back. Now, the only wonder is that he is alive."

"Have you learned his name?"

"No, nor anything else."

"Strange!"

"I am running quite a hospital!" quoth Captain Ned. "Two patients on our hands already. I hope no more will come, though I'll take them in if they are of the right sort."

The voice in the other room grew loud and angry.

"I must quiet the chap," Norcross added. "Will you come in?"

"Yes."

Vincent followed.

On the bed lay a man who, plainly, was having a hard fight to preserve his life, yet an unconscious one. He had not had a lucid interval since he was brought to the cottage.

He was of middle age, with very black hair and beard, and his face had once been swarthy, but was then a strange combination of pallor and fever-flush. He was a desperately sick man, and his very name was unknown.

"Let me at him!" he suddenly cried; "he's the villain who struck me with the knife!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SECRETARY RECEIVES WARNING.

THE man's manner was wild, but Captain Norcross answered, soothingly:

"The fellow is gone, messmate, and you are all right. The danger is over; rest easy!"

A few words in French his patient muttered, and then grew quiet.

"He's seen stormy times," the ex-sailor added.

"How is the knife-wound?"

"Doing finely. It was a deep slash, but he is pulling out in good style. If he had been attended to right after he was wounded, he would have had no trouble, but he was about gone when I discovered him floating down the river on the driftwood. The night before had been bright and moonlit half through, but a raw spring rain came up, and I make no doubt he lay soaking in it, on the driftwood, all the while. He was half-frozen when I rowed out and took him off, into my boat."

"You still think he was the victim of attempted assassination?"

"There can't be a doubt of it. He lets it out in his muttering, and the knife-cut speaks for itself."

"How do you think he came to be on the driftwood?"

"Nobody can say. Maybe he was flung into the river, and struck the wood, unknown to the murderer."

"If I had no other work, I would like this case for detective service."

"I sometimes fear I've done wrong not to report it to the authorities, but, as I told you at the start, once let him get his senses and he can tell us all, while, if I publish it abroad now, the guilty man will have a chance to escape."

"I pity this fellow."

"Naturally; but his is not a good face. He has been a man of strong passions."

The sick man stirred suddenly.

"Out of the way!" he cried. "No man shall block my path. Ha! I see you object; you mean to kill me! Back, I say! The knife! Coward, coward!"

He started up in delirious fear, but Norcross gently forced him back to the pillow.

"Be easy, shipmate; be easy! Your enemy is gone, and you are all right. Be calm!"

He had great influence over the unknown, and again the latter yielded. Norcross mixed a powder which he drank without remonstrance.

"He will soon be still," the ex-sailor added.

"I hope he will wake from some of his sleeps in good condition, for I admit I don't like acting as nurse."

"You are proceeding with your usual self-sacrificing spirit, and I hope your patient will be duly grateful, if he ever recovers."

"The doctor thinks he will pull through."

"Well, captain, I will leave you now; it is not prudent for me to be away from Thornholm longer. I need not ask you to guard your charges well, for I know your nature."

"I'll do my best, my boy."

They left the room, parted by the cottage, and Vincent hastened away. His step was lighter than it had been for many days.

At last, he had a mother, if not a father.

As he went he mused upon the strange chance that had made him the protector of that mother when she was so sorely afflicted and miserable. Little had he thought, then, that he was befriending one to whom he owed natural allegiance.

He was going along in a mood of exhilaration and thankfulness when he had a new thought which brought him to an abrupt stop.

His expression became one of consternation—he had suddenly thought of Veva Crapo.

Before, his conscience had reproached him because he was seeking to drive her father and mother away from Thornholm. How was it now? The case had become a thousand-fold worse.

The Mrs. Crapo of Norcross cottage was Edward's only legal wife; Veva called the second Mrs. Crapo mother!

No wonder, with his deep respect and affection for Veva, that the secretary's strong face trembled with emotion as he stood there alone in the swamp.

"Merciful heavens!" he muttered, "it will kill her!"

It was long before he stirred from his position. Time passed unheeded. He was seeking for some way by which to save, to spare the girl. At the very start he knew that there was no way—none, except to abandon the war against Crapo.

At last he was ready—even eager—to do it, as far as he was concerned alone, but he thought of his mother and her wrongs.

"It cannot be! The work must go on. It is a terrible thing for Veva, but I am helpless. Above all else earthly I owe allegiance to my mother. I will go on; I'll harden my heart; the innocent must suffer with the guilty!"

Setting his face in a stern frown he resumed his way, but the hardening process did not progress rapidly.

When he reached Thornholm he told a servant that he was ill and went to his room. He did not emerge until the next morning.

He had been engaged in a hard fight with himself, and the result was outward composure. He knew that there could be no turning back, and he had determined to treat Veva with reserved politeness.

Struggle as he would he must break her heart later. There was no help for it. All he could do was to learn to be indifferent.

Soon after breakfast he received word by way of a slave from Roland that he would not be wanted that day, as the latter had gone on a hunt.

Vincent made a decision at once. From that time he ought to, and would, avoid Veva, and the easiest way to do it was to absent himself as much as possible.

On the present occasion he would go for a walk to the northwest, in the direction of the Royalston plantation.

Fate is often capricious. It was so on this occasion. The secretary was rapidly crossing the grounds beyond the mansion when he came face to face with Veva.

She had rarely looked prettier. A becoming flush was in her face, and her dress was strikingly becoming. Vincent saw all this, but did

not waver—he would be frigid, and leave her as soon as possible.

Again Fate baffled him. Veva did not know of his intentions. She had made a shapely wreath, crown-shaped, from the leaves of the old trees, and, being in high spirits, suddenly pounced upon him.

"Would you be greater than Napoleon?" she demanded, lightly. "With all his power of years he was without a crown in his last days. See!—you are his superior; you wear a crown!"

The secretary had politely removed his hat to greet her, and before he could divine her intentions, she had put the crown on his head and stood smiling brightly, mischievously into his face.

How Vincent would have met this little artifice can never be known. It was most untimely.

Edward Crapo had been sauntering along a path, unconscious that any one was near him. He turned a group of shrubbery and saw, not the impulsive way in which all had been done, but the result.

There stood Veva and the secretary, face to face, and apparently on very friendly terms of equality, and Mr. Crapo was impressed with the idea that he had never seen a more pronounced love-scene.

He cleared his throat ominously; they turned and saw him.

Veva snatched off the unlucky crown as impulsively as she had put it on, and her face flushed anew.

"Miss Crapo," said Edward, with cold composure, "I think your mother wishes to see you in the house!"

Veva stammered in her reply. If she had not been inclined, now that it was over, to regard the affair as foolish, his icy reminder put it on a worse footing. She knew what was in his mind; she knew there was trouble ahead for her.

Before she had recovered from her confusion she was on her way to the mansion with Crapo, and the secretary was left alone.

Annoyed by the mishap, the latter kept on his way and carried out his previous plans. He expected to hear from the affair again, and he did.

Soon after his return he was informed by a negro that Mr. Crapo requested his presence in the library. He went at once. The elder gentleman was perusing the Life of Napoleon, but he laid it aside with deliberate calmness.

"The day is fine, Mr. Vincent," he remarked.

"Yes, sir," answered the secretary, with equal calmness.

"Doubtless, you have been for a walk?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thornholm is a fine property."

"It is, indeed."

"Miss Royalston is to be congratulated on securing such a home by marrying Roland."

"Thornholm can hardly be excelled."

"My daughter, however, will be about as well provided for, later."

Vincent could not fail to understand the gradual advance.

"Yes, sir," he again answered.

"She is to marry John Jay Lennox."

"Lennox has a fine plantation."

"Very. Veva's marriage to him will be very suitable, both being of old families and noble blood. The Thornholm and Lennox wealth is about a stand-off."

Really, it was amusing to see the cool effrontery of the student of Napoleon. Almost penniless, himself, Veva must go to Lennox without a dollar, if she went at all, but her father ignored the fact calmly.

"My daughter is young," he pursued, in an even voice, "and not always wise. You will excuse me if I say she proved this in the episode of to-day. I refer to the absurd crown."

"Yes?"

"Yes, Mr. Vincent. Considering that she is the pledged wife of Lennox, she was very thoughtless to act as she did. True, she is a natural coquette, but I strongly disapprove of her course."

"I think no harm was done, sir," quietly returned Vincent, anxious to avert a storm, for Veva's sake.

"I hope not. You, Mr. Vincent, are older than my daughter. You must see the difference in your worldly position and hers. You are poor; she is an heiress!"

Again the marvelous impudence of assertion, but it fell upon impregnable armor.

"I fully realize it, sir."

"No doubt you are fond of her; we all are. But, pray, sir, do not indulge her coquetry. Your manhood demands that you do not let her make sport of you. Women, Mr. Vincent, are merciless in their flirtations; their sense of honor is purely artificial, not natural, like a man's!"

Mr. Crapo looked at his slender hands as if conscious that their whiteness arose from the fact that they were clean, morally.

"I see, sir," placidly answered the secretary.

"Veva, being as good as Lennox's wife, must not coquet with any other man. Of course you agree with me, sir?"

"All you have said shows fatherly care and solicitude, as well as worldly wisdom."

"Enough! I perceive that you see the gulf between you and Miss Crapo, and the impossibility of meeting her on equal terms. I thank you for your company and courtesy, Mr. Vincent. You can go now, sir!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SIGHT OF TERROR.

DURING all of this interview Mr. Crapo's manner had not shown a sign of severity. He was cold, but not aggressive.

Yet he had succeeded in telling Vincent, outside of words as well as with words, that the marked friendship between himself and Veva must end; and Vincent knew perfectly well that, if he ignored the order, there would be trouble.

Crapo would not be so quiet again.

He regretted the crown episode very much, simply because it was bound to make more or less trouble for Veva, and whatever troubled her worried him.

He grew angry with himself as he found his thoughts wandering in this channel. What were trivial troubles compared with what he would bring upon her?

"Why didn't Roland stay at home, to-day, and thus prevent this encounter?" he thought irritably as he entered his room and sat down.

If he had known why Roland did not "stay at home" he would have been startled. That person had strong reasons for absenting himself.

He did not take his dogs on the occasion, but, entering the southeast swamp, took a straight course and hurried along for miles, heedless of all game that appeared by the way.

He reached his destination, at last, and, pausing at the edge of a clearing, stood looking on the Norcross Cottage. He saw something more than the building. The captain and Nina were standing near the door.

Roland's face lighted up as he saw that Norcross was about to go away.

"Good!" he commented. "If Old Neptune takes himself off out of the way I shall have a clear field, and it's dollars to pennies that I improve it. Zounds! I'll make love to the cottage beauty like a whirlwind! She has had time to think it over since she snubbed me before, and she can't fail to see that the master of Thornholm is a man to be desired!"

Unconscious of the mischief that was afoot, Captain Ned bade his foster-daughter good-by, went to the river, entered his boat and pulled away down the stream.

Nina stood by the door and watched him.

Once he paused and waved his hand cheerfully. Nina returned the farewell, and then he steadily receded. She returned to the cottage.

Roland held the big sailor in due respect, in certain ways, and, impatient as he was, he waited until the boat was out of sight before moving further.

Then he walked forward boldly, and soon appeared at the open door.

Nina saw him, at once; more, she recognized him, and a look of annoyance and uneasiness crossed her face. He lifted his hat with an attempt in the line of grace and politeness.

"Good-morning, miss!" he said, agreeably. "Can I trouble you for a drink of water?"

As water was the one thing most abundant in that vicinity, and the river was full to its banks, the request was not much less than absurd, but Nina, with a monosyllabic reply, did as requested.

"Pardon me, if I sit down and rest," Roland then added, and sat down without being encouraged.

Nina occupied herself with some light duty, and gave him no attention.

"Beautiful day, miss!"

"Yes, sir."

"The sun is just warm enough."

"Yes."

"No climate like ours."

"No."

These brief replies were not calculated to gladden the planter's heart, but he kept it up awhile longer. Then he began to press matters.

"I have not seen you since the day we met in the swamp."

"No?"

"No. Do you often go there?"

"No."

"Don't you like the woods?"

"No."

Roland was angry, but tried to remain cool.

"The swamp is disagreeable," he admitted. "I never saw but one pleasing thing in it. Can you guess what that was?"

"I am not good at guessing."

"It was yourself!"

"Sir?"

"Pardon me, for I mean no harm, and I only state the simple truth. The fact is, it was a complete and agreeable surprise when I chanced upon you in the swamp. I had never before seen or heard of you. I know a pretty girl when I see one—I do, by Jove!—and I saw one then. Pardon me if I am frank, miss, but I hope respectful admiration is not disagreeable."

"I do not covet admiration, sir," Nina answered, coldly.

"But I hope you don't blame me for what I cannot help."

"It is not necessary for us to discuss the point."

"But, my dear Miss Norcross—"

"You know my name, it seems."

"I've made inquiries."

"What right had you to do that?"

"Because I'd engendered a deuced big admiration for you, my dear young lady!"

Nina's face flushed with indignation. She had tried to discourage Roland with coldness, but his fixed intention to force matters to an unpleasant crisis was very apparent. She deeply regretted that Captain Norcross had gone away. True, Maggie Warner was in the next room, but she was in attendance upon the sick woman, and any disturbance might act unfavorably upon the latter. With the ex-wanderer and the nameless Frenchman as patients, quiet ought to be maintained in the cottage.

Such being the case Nina felt the need of managing Thornholm diplomatically, and getting rid of him, but his lawless admiration was so boldly expressed that she could not keep back her anger.

"I will thank you, sir, to change your mode of addressing me!" she declared.

"Bless me! why?"

"I claim the respect which a gentleman should show one of the opposite sex."

"Haven't you had it?"

"No, sir!"

"Pardon me, but you have a world of it. Respect! I do more than to respect you. Surely, you do not blame me if I am deeply touched. Blame your charms, rather—"

"You have said enough!"

"But I don't think I have made the case plain. You think because I am a rich and powerful man that we do not meet on equal footing. You were never wiser of the facts. I am not proud, and I yield you the same homage I would bestow upon a queen. A noble woman is the noblest thing on earth, and I feel sure you are all of that. From the first time I saw you I have loved you—"

"Enough, sir! I do not care to hear more."

"But do you scorn my honest love?"

"You feel none for me."

"I feel an ocean of it."

"Even if you do, I don't want to hear of it!"

"My darling, why are you so coquettish?" demanded Roland, whose hot blood could not brook so much opposition, and whose lawless admiration was running away with all prudence. "By Jove! things are come to a pretty pass if a man can't confess his love!"

"No doubt you can—to those who want to hear it. I do not. More than that, I must ask you to go away quietly. Your loud voice, for certain reasons, is not desirable here. Pray, go!"

"Not until I have my reward for all I've done!" asserted the planter. "I've tramped several miles on purpose to see you; I don't go back empty-handed. If you feel that I am too precipitate I'll give you time to think it over—"

"I need no time!"

"Always bearing in mind that you have a sincere worshiper in me. Think of it! I am young, rich, and absolute master of one of the finest estates in Virginia. I wish to marry; I love you! Is this nothing?"

"Nothing!"

Nina spoke with resolution. She did not fail to see that he had carefully refrained from saying that he wished to marry *her*, and, if he had done otherwise, it would have made no difference.

She saw his low, evil nature, and remembering the light in which he stood to her and her loved ones, his presence aroused her deepest repugnance and fear.

He, however, had lost all prudence.

"Zounds! even harsh words are sweet from those red lips of yours. Your mouth is a loadstone; it draws me to you; I crave a kiss, my darling!"

Extending his arms he advanced toward her, but his warfare came to a sudden end. He heard a sound at one side and looked to discover the cause.

The wounded Frenchman had risen in his fever, come to the connecting door, and now stood bolt upright in the passage. He wore a night-dress which reached to his ankles; a cloth was bound around his forehead; and his face was as pallid as that of a dead man. Taken all in all, he was a ghostly-looking object, nothing except his black hair and beard serving to break the uniform white color he presented. His eyes were vacant and expressionless, and fixed in his ghastly face like balls of glass.

Roland saw, and then he recoiled.

His own face grew pallid.

He looked at the sick man with an appearance of the utmost consternation.

He seemed to be rooted to the spot with horror.

Slowly the unknown raised one hand and pointed to the planter. It was an idle, unconscious gesture, but the effect was startling.

Roland uttered a cry of terror; he turned and fled from the cottage in mad haste.

Even when outside he did not pause. An open

window enabled Nina to see him further. Straight toward the wood he went, running like one pursued by a deadly enemy, and his pace had not slackened when he plunged into the cover of the trees.

The sick man pressed one hand to his forehead and muttered several indistinguishable words.

Maggie Warner, alarmed by Roland's cry, came out of Mrs. Crapo's room. Not having seen the planter's strange and headlong flight, she naturally ascribed the cry to the Frenchman.

She was a woman of resolution, and she promptly led the unknown back to his room and ordered him to retire, all of which he did meekly. Then she returned to Nina.

"That fellow must be quiet, and not alarm your mother," she declared. "I don't wholly like my mistress's condition. She thinks too much about those papers at Thornholm, and it may hurt her mind. What freak did our Frenchman have when he yelled so?"

"It was not he who cried out."

"Who was it?"

"Roland Thornholm!"

"It was?" cried Maggie, with a start.

"Yes."

"And he has dared to come here! By heavens! there is trouble ahead for us!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MAD-WOMAN GOES TO THORNHOLM.

EVENING at Thornholm Lodge!

The mansion was lighted as usual, for the hour was early, but the place was unusually quiet. Veva and the second Mrs. Crapo had driven over to Royalston Hall to visit Berenice, and Vincent was in his room.

Edward Crapo sat in his library, reading the Life of Napoleon, when Roland entered. It was his first appearance since morning. Where he had been Edward did not know, but absence on his part was not unusual. He could find food as well as drink, at the Glenville hotel.

The student of Napoleon gave his putative son hardly a glance until the latter spoke.

"Are you busy?" he asked, abruptly.

Edward glanced up, saw that Roland looked pale and nervous, and grew curious. Hiding the latter fact, he calmly answered:

"No."

"I'd like to ask your opinion on one subject."

"Proceed!"

"I've had an argument with some of the fellows, you see, and am not quite sure on one point."

"Perhaps I can enlighten you."

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

There was anxiety—even eagerness—in the question, and Crapo's curiosity increased.

"I suppose you refer to disembodied spirits?"

"I do."

"Well, I never saw one."

"Is there such a thing?"

"I've heard so."

"Do you believe it?"

"As I said before, I've never seen one."

"My old nurse used to tell me of them; she was quite sure that such things were facts, so to speak. Others dispute it. What is a fellow to think?"

Roland turned a wishful gaze upon his elder. His eyes were red, but he was not intoxicated, heavily as he had been drinking.

"You are old enough to have had some experience yourself. Did you ever see one?"

"To tell the truth, I think I have!" Roland admitted.

"Pray describe the case."

"No!" the planter answered, with great emphasis. "I have nothing to say on that head; we must speak in a general way, or not at all. Do you believe in ghosts?"

Crapo studied his companion closely for several moments before he answered.

"No!" he then returned. "Such a thing as a ghost never walked in the nineteenth century; the idea is absurd. The dead never come back. The only ghosts that man ever saw were the images and imaginations of his guilty conscience."

Roland moved uneasily.

"Yet some folks say they have seen them."

"Nonsense! Drop the idea! While there are men and women so ignorant that they could not exhibit a thimbleful of brains, there will be believers in ghosts; but all others will reject the possibility."

Roland squirmed a little more in his chair, changed color under his companion's gaze, and then abruptly and nervously rose.

"That's the view I take of the matter, but some of the fellows would have it otherwise, in our argument. I feel that I was right. Good-night!"

"Wait! What's your hurry?"

"I'm going to bed. Good-night!"

Roland hastened out with an air like anything else rather than that of a man who had had his opinion confirmed in an argument. Crapo looked after him curiously.

"What is afoot? The youngster is all demoralized over something. Seen a ghost himself,

has he? Humph! His ghost could not have been a pleasant companion. Who was it? What was it?"

It was no idle curiosity which moved the far-seeing schemer, and, in his efforts to surmise the cause of Roland's demoralization, he mechanically thrust his hand into his pocket.

Then he arose abruptly. He had discovered that he had lost the key to his private room, and, as he never allowed any one to visit that sacred place except his eye, he became anxious in regard to the key. He went in search of it at once.

The losing of the key was responsible for a new act in the drama that was absorbing Thornholm in those days.

It had been dropped on a walk, back of the house, when he removed another article from his pocket, and, also accidentally dragged out the key. The circumstance was noticed by a person who was observing him secretly.

Behind a tree stood a woman. She was far from young; her hair was gray and disheveled; her dress was ragged and wretched to an extreme.

It was Crapo's first wife, and the wild, cunning expression of her face told that her mental faculties were again clouded. In some way she had escaped from her attendants, resumed her old garments, and was again the ragged, wretched wanderer.

When Crapo was out of the way she pounced upon the key. Its possession seemed to please her greatly, for she chuckled long and merrily, if not musically. Then she suddenly stopped, looked at the house, nodded several times, and started in that direction.

A rear door was open. She entered quickly, and her movements, though very cautious, were bold.

Her manner showed a strange mixture of madness and method, but the former predominated. It was betrayed in her wild, cunning manner, and in her reckless entrance to the house.

She knew the way well. There had been no great change since she had been mistress there, and she went quickly, silently from room to room.

Luck favored her greatly. Not one of the household was moving about; all the negroes were in another part of the mansion.

She passed rapidly up the stairs, along the hall, and to the door of Crapo's room. This she unlocked with the key so unexpectedly acquired. When the door opened, however, she saw only darkness beyond, but, besides the hall-lamp, a smaller one was burning on the table.

She took it and entered Crapo's room, afterward locking herself in.

Her gaze became fixed upon his trunk. Ever since she had suggested to Vincent that, if Crapo had any papers of value to them, they probably would be found in that place, her mind had been on the possibility of getting them. This had led to her fresh outbreak, and to this visit, so pregnant with the cunning of madness.

The trunk was locked, but she set the lamp down and took an ordinary chisel out from among her rags.

With this she attacked the lock, and soon broke it away entirely.

The trunk was open.

She began to search the interior quickly. There was reason in her movements, for, though several papers were there, she flung them all aside hurriedly until she came to a slender package tied with a bit of tape.

This she opened, and looked at the first paper.

She broke in a fresh series of chuckles as she saw that it was the false certificate of her own death in Cuba.

She tied the string around the whole package again, thrust it into the bosom of her dress, and was ready to go. She quitted the room, relocked the door, and flung the key down on the floor where it would be found readily.

Then she had a new idea.

At the further end of the hall was the entrance to the portrait-room. The method which was in her madness led her to desire to see the faces of her ancestors, and she was about to go that way when light footsteps were followed by the appearance of Hector, the big Newfoundland dog.

As Veva's favorite Hector had almost unlimited privileges, and there was nothing strange about his appearance, but he seemed to think the presence of the ragged wanderer very strange, indeed.

Woman and dog looked at each other without motion for a moment; then Hector suddenly vibrated his tail and advanced to her side.

He had recognized a congenial nature.

The mad-woman was not backward with friendly demonstrations. She bent and caressed his shaggy head, and Hector was at once captivated through that subtle influence which his species recognize so readily.

The wanderer paused only a few moments; she did not forget her remaining work. Retaining the lamp, she went to the entrance to the portrait-room. Sliding the rusty bolt with some trouble, she entered. Hector followed; she reclosed the door.

She was among the pictures of her ancestors.

Face after face, and generation after generation, looked down upon her.

She had thought of one, only. There was the portrait of her father, Robert Allan Thornholm, and she looked with rapt attention. Then she sunk upon her knees, clasped her hands and continued the earnest look.

Much of the wildness faded from her expression. Her lips moved as if in prayer. There was no coherent thought in her mind, and she could not reflect upon the long years of madness and misery which had passed since she last stood there before, but all was not darkness in her afflicted mind.

Hector turned his big brown eyes upon her. He was not capable of understanding the scene, but his singular interest in her was on the increase.

For a long time she was unconscious of all around her, but a sound caused her to turn, at last.

Then she sprung to her feet.

She was no longer alone in the room.

Edward Crapo stood before her.

CHAPTER XX.

THE ATTEMPTED CRIME.

SEVERAL things, apparently trivial in themselves, had just happened in another part of the mansion.

First, a chambermaid started to descend the stairs, and as her dress caught the key which the mad-woman had thrown down, the bit of brass was pulled forward until, reaching the stairs, it fell to the hall below and fell with but little noise on the carpet.

It was only a few moments later that Crapo came out of the library, to look for the missing key. The light shone plainly upon it; he saw it at once.

A short time before he had stood in that very place, removed his hat and put himself in order, generally, after coming into the house, and, finding the key there, he naturally supposed that he had then dropped it.

Thus, all suspicion was removed from his mind by a very simple chance.

"That's lucky," he thought. "Some one might have found it, invaded my room, and got at my trunk and papers. I don't want any ghosts of bygone days cropping out. Ghosts! I forget; I'll leave that species to Roland!"

A satirical smile curled his lips.

"Ghosts never have troubled me; I never expect they will—though, to be sure, old Robert Allan Thornholm must feel like stepping down out of his gilded frame, in order to level anathemas at my head!"

This turn of affairs was productive of results. He had not seen Robert Allan Thornholm's portrait in many years. A sudden impulse moved him to go and look at it then.

No better time could be found; the house was very quiet, and Veva and the second wife, at least, were away.

He went to the upper hall, took the lamp and went to the door of the portrait-room. He was slightly surprised to find the bolt slipped back, but it seemed to be a trivial matter.

He entered the room.

A great surprise awaited him.

The place was already lighted, and a woman was kneeling in front of Robert Allan Thornholm's picture, apparently engaged in prayer. Scarcely able to believe what he saw, he stared until the wind caught the door and closed it. The sound caused the kneeling woman to spring to her feet.

After a score of years husband and wife stood face to face!

Crapo did not recognize her. Not once had it ever occurred to him to doubt that she was dead, after he received the certificate to that effect, and in the gray-haired and ragged wanderer before him there was but little resemblance to the lost Rosalind.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, roughly.

"I have come to see my kindred," was the plain, coherent reply.

"Better look in a rag-bag."

"I know where to look."

"And I, too, know your place. It is in prison—"

"My place is here, Edward Crapo!" the wanderer declared, in a deep voice.

"Perhaps you've been making this room your quarters. I've heard of a mad-woman around here—"

"Who drove me mad?"

"How should I know?"

"Who was it, but you?"

"Come! you are crazy!"

"Edward Crapo, don't you know me?"

"No."

"Look again! Look, and study well my face!

The marks of time are there, for the lapse of twenty years is a journey longer than from Cuba to here, but some sign must be left; some evidence of Thornholm blood. Look!"

She flung back the tangled hair from her face, and her voice rang out clearly and defiantly—

more than that, with a very familiar sound. The light fell strongly upon her face, and her

eyes had a familiar appearance which startled him. He recoiled a little, and his color changed.

"You are—"

"Rosalind Thornholm Crapo—once your wife!"

The truth came to him like a flash. Proof was there in more ways than one; the voice, the eyes were Rosalind's—yes, despite the havoc of time, the form, the face and the every movement were hers. It was not a moment in which to speculate upon contrary evidence; he simply saw what was before him and behind.

His wife had come back from the grave!

Terrible fact! His icy composure fled before it. His strong face was ashen, and beaded with perspiration. Through his mind swept a realization of the position he and the new occupants of Thornholm would be placed in, if the terrible fact was known that his first wife was alive.

His emotion had its effect upon the wanderer, but not of a favorable kind. The wild light leaped back into her eyes, and she beat her bosom in a frenzied way.

"Yes, I am Rosalind Thornholm!" she exclaimed, "and I am come for vengeance! You thought to bury me in Cuba, but I am alive to dumfound you—alive to condemn and ruin you. Coward! traitor! bigamist! the whole world shall soon know your sins!"

Crapo was too much overcome to think clearly, but one idea was strong in his mind. If he could silence the woman where she was, her story would never be told. Plainly, she was breaking away from the fetters of madness; a day's delay might be fatal.

A light leaped into his own eyes wilder, fiercer than that in hers.

"Malediction seize you!" he hissed, "you shall never tell the story in this world!"

And he sprung forward with hands extended to grasp her throat.

Before that murderous attack she would have been helpless, but she had a friend upon which she had not counted. Hector, never a friend of Crapo's since the latter had given him the first of many kicks, had been watching suspiciously.

The noble animal now sprung between the would-be assassin and his victim, and the former barely avoided a fall.

Muttering a curse he tried it again, while the wanderer, greatly alarmed, looked in vain for a way of escape, but, this time, Hector did more than to confront him; he sprung upon the man, and the weight of his body bore Crapo to the floor.

As he went down his head struck against the old cabinet, and he was half stunned, but he retained his senses sufficiently to see his wretched wife flee from the room, followed by the dog.

Making a great effort, he regained his feet. His head swam dizzily, but he overcame it as soon as possible. Pursuit must be made at once, or all was lost.

He hastened out of the old room.

As chance would have it, woman and dog had left the house unseen by any one, and, too, only one person except Crapo had heard the least sound from them. Vincent, sitting in his room, had noticed what seemed to be a slight scuffle, and then a jar, but had ascribed all to the playfulness of the negroes.

The open doors gave Crapo the clew, and he hastened out of the house, into the grounds. There, the darkness, the trees and the shrubbery were against him, but, after going a few rods, he happened upon Roland.

The latter, too nervous to keep his room, was wandering around in an ugly mood, and would have passed without a word; but Crapo accosted him.

"Have you seen any one here?" Edward demanded.

"I can't see in the dark!" was the surly reply.

"Fool! has any one passed you? Answer, or you may pay dearly for it in your loved dollars!"

"A woman and a dog rushed by like mad," Roland condescended to say. "The dog looked like Hector—"

"How long ago?"

"About two minutes."

"Which way?"

"Toward the southeast; but, zounds! you need not pursue. They're a mile off before now, and the night is dark as Halifax. You'll have to give it up."

There was common sense in this assertion, as Crapo plainly saw. He stood still.

"Have you met the enemy?" Roland asked, curiously.

"Yes."

"Good! Perhaps you won't sneer at my ghost, now," was the unguarded observation.

Crapo caught his companion fiercely by the

arm.

"You must help me run that woman down!"

"Not much. She isn't my enemy."

"You talk as the fool talks; she is your enemy; far more yours than mine. If you value your future peace, join me in this!"

"What do you mean?"

"She threatened us both."

"How?"

"She is agent for a man who is our enemy,

though not a reasonable one. She is mad, but she knows his business and ours. She is dangerous; she must be hunted down. See?"

"No, I don't. Who is the man in the case?"

"Never mind. The affair goes far back of your years of discretion; I can tell you nothing, but your whole future depends upon helping me."

"I think you are humbugging me, but, as for the woman-hunt, you don't need to urge me. That will be a new and stirring sport. Count me in!"

"Good! Will you have your best hound ready at the first glimmer of day, in the morning?"

"Yes."

"Enough! Good-night!"

He hastened away toward the house, leaving Roland looking after him in wonder.

"What the dickens is up? I have found a weak spot in my marble father's armor. He scoffed at my ghost, but he has seen a living enemy, and it has dispelled the ice in his nature in the twinkling of an eye. Who can this woman have been? I don't believe the yarn that she menaces me; but I'll help the old man. Go on a woman-hunt? Why, to be sure. It'll be great sport!"

CHAPTER XXI.

CRAPO HUNTS HUMAN GAME.

Nothing else could have amazed Edward Crapo so much as the reappearance of his wife. He had supposed for a score of years that she was sleeping under the soil of Cuba, and a less practical man might have doubted even then.

He, however, did not waver.

Despite the natural, and unnatural, marks of time, he had recognized the voice and looks of the unfortunate Rosalind, and her own words had removed all chance for hesitation.

Of course his mention of a mysterious man, to Roland, was only a concoction of his fertile mind, and, though not made with the skill of his calmer moments, was designed to throw the younger man off the scent.

Crapo himself thought only of the woman.

Had the grave opened to send forth this person, or where had she been all those years since he received from Cuba the certificate of her death?

Ha! the certificate! He had always preserved it—might it not be useful now? Few eyes were as keen as his; few persons could recognize in the wretched mad-woman, the once beautiful Rosalind. If she appeared to press her claims, could he not defeat her by means of the certificate?

Anxious to look upon the paper, he hastened to his private room, struck a light and turned to the trunk. One step he took, and then paused.

The trunk had been opened; a part of its former contents was scattered on the floor.

"Who has dared?" he thought, as he flashed an angry glance around the room.

It had no tenant but himself.

Then he noticed that the lock had been torn away hastily, and an alarming suspicion crossed his mind. He knelt by the trunk, and began a nervous examination of the papers therein. When it was done he paused and stared blankly at the wall.

"It was her work!" he muttered. "She is not as mad as she seemed; she had sense enough to come here, rifle my trunk and take away that paper. The certificate is in her hands! How, now, can I prove that she was thought to have died in Cuba?"

The icy composure of his face was gone; he showed now as a man of human fears and passions. The expression on his face was dark and ominous.

"Enough!" he finally added; "it is but the flourish of the pen after the signing of her death-warrant. To-morrow morning I take her trail, and the bloodhounds will run her down easily. Then—"

A significant pause ended the sentence, but there was good reason why the mad-woman should stand in dread of the events about to follow.

Crapo half-regretted that he had not followed her in the darkness, hopeless as the chase seemed; but he had confidence in the morning hunt—he had seen bloodhounds on the trail before then.

Shortly after, Veva and the second Mrs. Crapo returned from their visit to Royalston Hall. Edward never put himself out to see any of the household, and did not go near them. There was nothing to show them that such stirring events had occurred during their absence, and he certainly was not inclined to tell them.

The remainder of the night passed peacefully.

Crapo was early astir, and, on going out of the house, found Roland on hand with his favorite hound.

Day had not yet dawned, but the darkness was slowly receding.

"Put the dog to work!" Crapo directed.

The hound was duly shown what was expected of him, and he found no trouble in taking the trail. It led away directly toward the southeast, and the chase was begun.

"I see you carry a gun," Roland observed.

"So do you, don't you?"

"Yes; but you are not noted as a hunter."

"I am on a hunt to-day!" was the cool reply.

"What's the order? Do we shoot, or not?"

"Would you shoot at a woman?" Crapo asked, looking sharply at his companion.

"If she was my enemy, I might."

"This woman is your enemy."

"I think I understand."

Roland did understand, but intended to let Crapo manage his own case. Unless convinced that she was dangerous to him, he was not going to commit any such deed as that hinted at.

Putative father and son were playing what was intended for deep games. Crapo had determined to make Roland party to the crime; Roland, with his curiosity all aroused, was anxious to worm his way into the elder man's secrets so as to force the latter to confide in him.

The open land was successfully crossed, and when they reached the swamp day had fully dawned.

Thus far the hound had not hesitated for a moment, and he entered the woods with the same confidence. For nearly a mile all went well; then the rapid campaign came to a sudden stop. They reached a broad stream of water, and the dog paused at the bank. Then he ran up and down, seeking to recover the trail.

"We are outwitted!" Crapo exclaimed.

"Not much!" Roland declared. "I'll back that hound to get any scent on earth!"

He did not boast without good cause, but the result was not favorable. The dog searched both banks; he ran up and down, with his nose to the ground, for a long distance, but at the end of half an hour it was plain that he was wholly at fault.

"Talk about the woman being mad!" Roland angrily exclaimed. "Why, she's as sane as you or I am. She has taken to the water to break the trail, and waded a long distance."

"If she did it, it was instinct, not reason."

"She's done it, anyhow."

"Then she must have gone straight on into the heart of the swamp. Come! let's go east ourselves, and we will find her yet. Let the dog keep up his search for the scent."

This was done in a manner as systematic as possible.

Edward Crapo was busy with his thoughts. What was to be done with the mad-woman when they found her? Darkly as he had talked, it was not his intention to slay her in cold blood, though he would welcome any excuse by which he could do it. His idea was to seize her and shut her up somewhere.

He was trying to think how and where this could be done.

Moving on into the heart of the swamp, they came suddenly on two men. Roland recognized Drake Hodge and Black Tuck, and would not have been surprised to see them try hostilities upon him, but Crapo called to them at once.

The outlaws were wary, but finally consented to hold an interview.

"Have you seen any one around here?" Crapo asked, abruptly.

"Nobody, yer honor," Hodge answered, with servile politeness.

"No wandering woman in rags, eh?"

"A wanderin' woman in rags?"

"Yes."

"We ain't seen her ter-day, but we know whar her hut is, yer honor."

"You do? Where is it?"

"On the Black Acre."

"Humph! A bad place to reach."

"We kin go thar, yer honor," declared Hodge.

"Yes, sir, yes, yer honor," added Black Tuck.

Crapo smiled. He knew of the mire bed and the mire-bed's death-clutch, though he had never been there; and knew, too, that the death-trap had swallowed up more than one man. There seemed little risk in taking such knaves as Hodge and Tuck into his confidence, and he decided to let them risk their lives.

He questioned them about their knowledge of the hut, and they, looking covertly at Roland, told as much as they saw fit.

They were promptly engaged, Crapo having decided that the mad-woman undoubtedly had gone to her resort on the knoll.

The new recruits led the way, and Roland brought up the rear. It was an odd chance which made them his temporary allies, but crime brings extremes together.

The Black Acre was finally reached. It did not look so bad to Crapo as it was reputed to be, and he was half inclined to follow the outlaws across, but Roland, knowing more of the place, kept him back. Hodge and Tuck crossed, and were gone several minutes. Finally, they reappeared on the further side.

"Nobody ain't hyar," Hodge announced.

"Are you sure?"

"Yas; the hut is empty, an' nobody ain't no-whar else around."

"She may be hiding."

"She ain't. Thar ain't no chance. Underbrush is skurce, an' she couldn't climb a two-foot tree with a smooth trunk. We kin sw'lar she ain't hyar."

"What is to be done, now?" Crapo asked, turning to Roland.

"Either give it up, or hunt hap-hazard."

"We won't give it up."

Hodge and Tuck started back with due caution, but luck was not with them. The former made a misstep, slipped from a log, caught hold of the negro, and, a moment later, both were floundering in the mud.

The yells that immediately rose would have done credit to a tribe of Indians. The outlaws knew the power of the mire-bed's death-clutch, and they felt themselves being pulled down by the adhesive mixture. Their terror was boundless.

They shrieked for help in chorus, clinging to the logs, but only succeeding in pulling the latter down with them. Unaided, a man might as well try to lift the State of Virginia bodily as to escape from that death-pit.

Since the previous adventure there, in which Walter Vincent took part, some one had cut a long, stout pole, with a fork at one end, and left it near the danger-line. Crapo now saw the pole and flung out one end. Hodge seized it eagerly.

"Pull!" Edward ordered, addressing Roland.

"Are you sure it's wise?"

"What do you mean?"

"The world would be better off, if rid of them."

"Help! help!" yelled Hodge, in terror. "Don't you see we are sinkin'? Pull us out while yer can!"

"Pull me out!" chattered Black Tuck. "Pull me first, an' den I'll help him!"

Roland still hesitated, and the outlaws' distress grew greater and greater. They shrieked wildly, and shook the jelly-like mud in frantic efforts to extricate themselves.

"The fellows may be useful to us both," observed Crapo. "Lend your aid—we must save them!"

The planter took hold reluctantly, and their combined efforts finally landed Hodge on firm ground. Black Tuck was fast sinking, and his eyes, enlarged by terror, looked like white saucers in the black area of mud. He was whimpering like a chastised child, and unable to use his voice above a whisper.

His turn at the pole came, but it was not so easy to save him. He had gone well down, and the mud clung to him tenaciously.

It was plain to see that, unaided, no man could get out alive when once in the grasp of the mire.

A sharp kick aroused the panting Hodge. He rallied, gave his aid, and, after a desperate struggle, the negro was also landed. He and Hodge were monuments of mud.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DETECTIVE ACTS RASHLY.

LITTLE suspecting what events had occurred, and were still occurring, Walter Vincent left the mansion, after breakfast, and walked down one of the many paths in search of solitude.

He was unconscious that he thus came under the notice of Veva, who stood at an upper window.

There are times when all persons yield to reckless impulses; Veva yielded then.

"I will go for a walk, too," she decided.

"Mr. Vincent has become as frigid as an iceberg, lately, and I am going to know the reason. He has not been himself since that unfortunate crown-of-leaves affair, and I suspect that somebody has been talking nonsense to him!"

Hastily donning a rustic hat, she left the house, took another path, and walked away at speed calculated to eclipse and intercept his movements.

As a result, just as the secretary was moving along with bent head and thoughtful face, he was suddenly aroused by sight of Veva in his path. She smiled brightly.

"We meet again, after many days. Welcome to my kingdom!"

She extended her hand, and Vincent could do no less than to take it. He had resolved to avoid the girl, but fate was clearly against him.

The clasp of his hand, however, was cold and lifeless, and she could not fail to see that marked reluctance was back of it. Her smile faded, and she looked at him keenly, but his somber face was turned partially away.

"Pardon me, Mr. Vincent," said Miss Crapo, with dignity. "I would not have offered my hand had I known the act would have been so disagreeable to you."

Unhappy Vincent turned quickly. All his good resolutions faded before the reproof.

"Disagreeable!" he echoed. "Pardon me, Miss Crapo, but you wrong me. If you knew in what high esteem I hold you; how sincerely I—I regard you; and how much I value your friendship, you would not imagine such a thing. I trust you will clear your mind of every doubt, and, as proof of my sincerity, I offer my hand again."

Beginning with confusion of speech he had finished with manly frankness, and Veva's resentment was driven away.

Their hands met again, but, this time, it was she who soon relinquished the hold.

"Do you know," she asked, abruptly, "that I came here to see you?"

"No," he answered, gravely.

"I saw you leave the house, and I followed at once."

He changed his position uneasily.

"Did you wish to consult me?" he asked.

"Yes. I wish to ask why you have changed so suddenly, and why you so persistently avoid me."

She spoke plainly, and her expression indicated that she was determined to have a direct answer. Vincent felt himself getting deeper and deeper into trouble. Knowing secrets of which she did not dream he was trying to crush out his hopeless love for her, but she seemed resolved to make the burden heavier to bear.

"I will confess, Miss Crapo," he responded, gravely, "that I have avoided you of late, but it has not been because I wished to. It was for your sake."

"For my sake?"

"Yes, Miss Crapo."

"What do you mean?"

"It is due your position—"

"What is my position?"

"My attention has been called by a mutual acquaintance to the fact that there is a wide gulf between us, socially. I am a poor man, working for my daily bread at low salary. I say low, not because it is smaller than I deserve, but because it is the reward of a laboring man—of a man who may yet be engaged in using a spade for a living. Such am I, while you are of noble blood, an heiress, and a member of the highest society."

He had drawn attention to his poverty with unsparing words, hoping to jar her nerves, but she smiled when he had finished.

"I, an heiress? I, of noble blood? Perhaps you will say from what family comes my noble blood; to what fortune I am heiress!"

"At least, you have been reared in aristocratic society, while I was catching fish out of the salt water."

"And this grades our ranks in life?"

"Most certainly. It—"

"Plainly, some one has been talking very forcibly to you. Perhaps I am not maidenly to urge the point, but I cannot, will not sail under false colors. I am not the lofty creature you would make me out."

"But you must see a difference—"

"Who is this person who has talked absurdities to you? You hesitate; let me surmise. Was it Mr. Crapo?"

"I have had a frank talk with Mr. Crapo—"

Vincent was beginning cautiously, but Veva interrupted him impetuously:

"And now you will not talk frankly with me! Mr. Vincent, I am tired of this conversation; you speak like one without a mind of his own. At this rate I shall soon be angry, and wish you would go away where I shall never see you again!"

Miss Crapo was angry already. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes sparkled ominously.

Vincent was miserable. His better judgment told him that, in view of what the future must bring to them both, it would be the part of wisdom and humanity to make Veva seriously offended at that juncture, harsh as it seemed, but his love pressed prudence aside, and he thought only of making peace with her.

"I will be frank, Miss Crapo," he replied, slowly. "I acknowledge that your father sent for me after the episode of the crown of leaves, and kindly reminded me of the difference in our worldly positions. My judgment agreed with his, and I promised to—to remember I was your brother's secretary."

"In plainer words, to avoid me?"

"Plainly, yes!"

Again the color deepened in her face.

"Probably, you were glad to make the promise."

"Has my manner ever indicated it?"

"Your manner has been much like a weather-vane."

"Believe me, my motives have been of the best."

"No doubt it was very noble in you to give the pledge, but you might rid it of false pretenses. I am neither a Thornholm nor an heiress."

"But your social position—"

"Is nonsense!"

"I recognize your generous nature—"

"I am not generous, and don't want to be called so. More than that, I'll make everybody hate me, after this! I'll quarrel with every one, worry every one, misuse every one!"

Miss Crapo had plucked a rose from a bush near at hand, and was mercilessly tearing it to pieces.

"I am not angry with you," returned Vincent, hopelessly.

"Oh! I can't expect you to make a martyr of yourself for me."

"I am a martyr only when I stay away from you!" declared the secretary, recklessly.

"Indeed?"

"The happiest hours of my life have been passed in your society!"

Veva did not answer or look away from the ruined rose, which seemed to demand her closest attention.

"If I have erred," Vincent went on, "it has been from a mistaken sense of duty. Your friendship is of far more value than anything else at Thornholm. I offer my sincere apologies, and beg to be reinstated in your favor and your friendship."

Having recklessly decided to make the step he made it boldly. Concluding his apology, he stood before her with uncovered head and grave attention.

"I'm not sure you deserve to be forgiven," asserted Miss Crapo, solemnly.

"Nor I. But I am just as anxious."

"If I knew your repentance was sincere—"

"If—"

"And that you would not offend again—"

"I hope I shall not."

"Then I might forgive you!"

She flung away the wreck of the rose, smiled in her old, bright way, and held out her hand.

That time Vincent did not hesitate to take it. He knew that he had acted in a way unjust both to himself and to her, but her reproaches had put all of his prudence aside.

"We will not speak of this absurd matter again," observed Veva, as she withdrew her hand.

They did not, on that day, and the half-hour which followed was much like those they had passed in former days. The secretary yielded to the charm of her presence, and, ignoring the secrets of the house of Thornholm, was happy; while she was gay and grave, by turns, in the inimitable way peculiarly her own.

When she excused herself and returned to the house, however, a look of gloom and bitterness settled upon his face.

"More misery!" he muttered. "I love her! What word in human language will apply to such a wretch as I? Why did I not widen the breach between us? It would have been easy, but I yielded weakly to my impulses, and am deeper than ever in the wretched mess. By-and-by I shall come with my story to blight her whole after life. If I could suffer for both, I would laugh at misery, but I must put the world's darkest curse upon her life. How she will hate me, then!"

He flung himself upon a bench, and thought how he had changed from the cool, bold detective that men had called "Dangerous Dave."

He brooded over his troubles until a strong footstep announced the arrival of a second person.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HAUNTING SHADOWS OF CRIME.

VINCENT looked up and saw Captain Hereford. The hero of Cerro Gordo was not looking well. He had lost flesh, and the detective wrongfully suspected that he had taken to drink.

The new-comer bore a gun upon his shoulder, but was not incumbered with any game.

"Hallo, Vincent!" he greeted, in a friendly way. "You are neck-deep in thought."

"I was nearly asleep."

"Was that all? You look like a condemned murderer viewing the gallows in imagination. Never mind, though; I think I'll sit down and rest. Is that precious Thornholm at home?"

"I am told that he went off on a hunt, but you may now find him at home."

"I shall not look. Lord Roland and I don't admire each other—at least, I don't admire him."

"Unlike Miss Royalston," added Vincent, maliciously.

"I can't speak for her."

Vincent had paid back the captain's fling at his melancholy, and the latter proceeded to relapse into the same condition, at once. The detective waited a few moments, and then continued:

"Did you find game plentiful?"

"I have not been hunting."

"Yet, you carry a gun."

Hereford aroused.

"So I do, by Jove! You have the laugh on me. Vincent, you seem to be a good fellow, and I am impelled to confide in you. I haven't been myself, of late, and by these so-called hunts, during which I never seen any game, and by reckless riding, I try to banish thought."

"You should seek a physician."

"Coming from you, the advice is absurd. Didn't you read my secret at Royalston?"

"I think I did."

"Exactly. You may think me a weak fool, but we can't over-ride facts with philosophy; the facts will remain when words of reason die out. I hate myself, but I am in wretched mood!"

"Have courage. I am inclined to believe that your suit for Miss Royalston's hand is far from hopeless. There is no real bond of sympathy between her and Roland, and the future may see them drift apart."

"Have they quarreled?" Hereford asked, eagerly.

"Not yet, but I feel sure they will never marry."

"What reason have you for the belief?"

"Various matters which have come under my notice. You must excuse me from being explicit, for the secret is not mine to tell; but I believe another month will see the engagement broken."

The soldier's face had grown far brighter.

"Vincent, you are a man too sensible to mistake a mole-hill for a mountain, and I feel sure you would not play with my feelings."

"I am wholly sincere."

"Then give me your hand! You have cast out a rope to a drowning man, and I won't forget it in you!"

Hereford heartily shook the hand extended to meet his own, and then added:

"Don't think me weak, if you can help it. If I were to tell you all about this wretched affair—as far as I know it—you would not wonder at my dejection. You are fortunate not to be attached to any woman!"

He spoke with the usual wisdom of the world, and as usual, too, fell far short of the facts.

Vincent's face clouded. He was "attached to a woman," and he believed that his own misfortunes completely dwarfed his companion's. He must blast the future happiness of the woman he loved.

His nature, however, was wholly unlike the captain's, and under no circumstances would he have thought of confiding in a third party.

"If you could give me any clew," began Hereford, after a pause, but he was interrupted.

"I cannot; and, sir, if you hope ever to win the battle, you will keep all I have said a dead secret."

"Most emphatically I will."

"Don't seek to help your cause. Rest easy, and let the boat drift; that is your one hope. A rash word from you would ruin all, and put Berenice Royalston forever beyond your reach!"

The detective spoke with emphasis, but he had to deal with a sensible man.

"I have tried my hand and failed; I shall not try further. I have faith in your judgment, and will wait in tomb-like silence for the turn of the tide you have promised. Rest easy on that score!"

Vincent found Hereford as agreeable a companion as usual, and several minutes passed in conversation on other subjects, but the soldier did not delay after he was rested.

He had crossed Thornholm plantation because it was his shortest route, but he did not wish to see Roland.

After his departure, Vincent returned to the mansion.

He was just in time to see Crapo and Roland return from their "hunt."

That they had followed the human game to the extent of their ability was shown by the muddy condition of themselves and the hound, but their weary, angry air told just as plainly of complete failure.

Edward Crapo went to his room at once, every movement being made viciously. After all these years of idle luxury, he saw himself menaced with downfall, disgrace and worse. The desertion of his legal wife, and the putting of another in her place, were things not to be forgiven if she ever got her rights.

Once or twice the imperiled plotter wondered what had become of the real heir of Thornholm, but the chances of his having escaped the fever when the mother was supposed to have died were so few, that he lingered only briefly on the subject.

The idea that a daughter might have been born on that tropic island, and have survived, never occurred to him as among the things possible.

He wondered vaguely if his deceit in regard to Roland was sure to be discovered. If the deserted wife had left the Cuban hospital in her right mind she must have known what became of her son, then, but it was by no means certain that she had left in that condition.

He would have felt greatly relieved had he known the truth—that she had risen from the hospital-bed in delirium, wandered away, and, it was then supposed, been drowned in the ocean.

Where she really did go, and where she had wandered during the interval of twenty years, no one but the Omnipotent could ever know.

It was a very silent party at the table. Crapo was wrapped in icy reserve; Roland was thoughtful and sullen; Veva, as quiet as the others; while the reigning Mrs. Crapo seeing her husband's mood, wasted no words, but had visions of the future, in which her husband played an important part, in the library, with a certain book in his hand.

Soon after, Roland ordered his horse and galloped away toward Royalston Hall. His mind was seriously perturbed, and he sought his betrotthed as the remedy.

Since he saw the sick man at the Norcross cottage peace had deserted him. Once, he had seen a man who actually resembled the shape he had beheld at the cottage and taken for a specter.

Had the shape been that man, or his ghost? If the latter, the supernatural tales told of

old by the negroes might be true; if the former, he was menaced by danger even more serious.

During the forenoon hunt, and after Hodge and Tuck had been extricated from the mud, his course had taken him near Captain Norcross's home. He resolved to view it again. Approaching stealthily, he gained good position and looked.

All was quiet and peaceful.

A little later, however, the old sailor came out with a bound in tow, which he controlled with a rope, and seemed trying to make him take a scent.

Really, this meant an effort to find the mad-woman. With the recurrence of her malady she had risen, gone out unseen and fled; and they were trying to find her without alarming Vincent.

Having no inkling of this fact, however, Roland grew frightened and hastened away.

He saw no more of the old captain, but his mind dwelt persistently upon the shape—man or specter—he had seen at the cottage, and peace had deserted him.

Feeling himself in danger, he tried to form plans for protection. He knew he must learn what the thing at the cottage was. If it proved to be a phantom, perhaps it would haunt him forever; if a living man, he must die in the house which sheltered him.

And such was the lover who was seeking Berenice Royalston's presence!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE EPISODE OF THE NOTE.

BERENICE received the master of Thornholm kindly and graciously. Greater affection than that she had never shown for him, and he was satisfied.

He had never given her credit for great depth of feeling, and did not wish that she should have it.

In her company he soon forgot his haunting trouble, and would have been happy had not his own limited powers of expression once or twice recalled the fact that his attempt to add to his education under Vincent's tuition had become a farce through his own aversion to study, and persistent avoidance of the work he had set for himself.

For an hour conversation continued briskly; then Roland spoke of a matter which had been on his mind all the time.

"By the way," he began, "isn't it about time to announce the date of our marriage publicly?"

A shadow flitted across her face.

"Who is so anxious to know?" she asked, quietly.

"No one, perhaps; every one, possibly. Nobody has questioned me, but, of course, our friends would like due notice."

"Three months' notice should be sufficient."

Roland's face clouded.

"Three months! That would bring it well into the fall, counting from now."

"Let us count from October," Berenice returned, smiling. "I cannot possibly get ready before Christmas."

"What! six months from now?"

"I believe it is."

"What's the use of such delay?"

"My dear Mr. Thornholm, you don't understand what a momentous affair a marriage is to a woman. She wants ample time for preparation, and all her little ambitions are ruined by undue haste."

"In this case, it looks to me like undue delay."

"How little you understand a woman!"

"By Jove! you are right there!"

"You admit it! Then let me have my own way, in this affair."

Roland had been annoyed by the suggestion of such a lapse of time before the wedding, but, though a little sulky, he had not been irritable, and Berenice's good humor kept ill feeling out of the argument.

As soon as she could leave the unpleasant subject conveniently, she introduced another.

"By the way," she remarked, "I had an odd experience, the other day. After leaving Thornholm I noticed a half-folded paper in the carriage. How it came there I do not know, and can only surmise that it was dropped near your residence, and then whirled into my carriage by an erratic breeze, unseen by me, as I drove away. Not knowing whence it came I examined it, found it to be a note, and, before I suspected the truth, had read all. By its beginning I can only guess that it belongs to you, and I apologize for reading it."

She extended a half-sheet of note-paper, and Roland, much to his surprise, read as follows:

"DEAR R—:—I beg that you will come to the house as soon as possible. Something strong, wonderful and joyful has occurred, and no time is to be lost. We shall all watch for you. Come! Yours, lovingly,
NINA."

The reader will recognize in the foregoing the note by which Vincent was summoned to the Norcross cottage when his mother first appeared there; and it will also be remembered that, when the captain first took him from the hospital in Cuba, the initial "R" upon his infant's

garments had led the ex-sailor to call him "Robert" for many years.

All was very simple, with the key to the mystery, for Vincent had accidentally dropped the note; but, when it came to Berenice's hands, she naturally surmised that "R—" was merely a contraction of Roland.

That young man at once saw that he was unfavorably placed.

He had never before seen the note, but it was in a lady's writing, and signed with a lady's name. He did not then recall the girl of the cottage, and the situation was embarrassing.

Innocent though he was, for once in his life, he felt the color deepening in his face.

If he had told the truth and denied all knowledge of the note, he might possibly have convinced Berenice partially, but he saw fit to take a different course.

Always skeptical himself, he usually suspected everybody else of falsehood. Now, believing others like himself, he thought his betrothed would not accept the truth, and, under the impulse of the moment, he determined upon an audacious lie.

Luck showed him a way to shape his denial.

"Yes, it's for me," he returned, with assumed carelessness. "It is from the captain of my club, Nixon. Of course you have heard him called by his nickname, 'Nina'."

"I should say he deserves it."

"Why?"

"By the way he closes the note."

Roland looked at the paper again, and the words, "Yours, lovingly," stared him in the face. "Nixon is a queer fellow," he agreed, feeling hot and uncomfortable.

"His penmanship is quite like a lady's," added Berenice, indifferently.

Roland flushed. Why had he not considered his falsehood well before venturing to use it?

"I don't know his writing, but it is very likely some one else wrote it for him. I gave it only casual attention, when received; but I noticed that Nixon was in an odd mood when I answered the call; probably he tried to play a joke on me. Zounds! it must have irritated him to see how coolly I took his jest. Ha! ha!"

Roland laughed, but there was no music in the sound, and he wished the note at the bottom of the ocean.

Berenice exhibited no dissatisfaction with the explanation, but, after commenting carelessly upon Mr. Nixon's alleged "jest," changed the subject skillfully, and did not refer to it again.

The visitor, however, was ill at ease, and, as soon as was prudent, he cut the conversation short and took his departure.

As he rode away, he thought of the note with mingled annoyance and perplexity.

"I've put my foot into it knee-deep!" he muttered. "What a fool I was to try and make her believe such a clumsy lie! The writing is a woman's, as any one can see, and so is the language. If Berenice is at all sensitive, she won't forget this!"

The other part of the case next claimed his attention.

"It's remarkably odd, anyhow. I don't see who this 'R—' is. No such person lives at Thornholm, and it must be that the note blew in from the highway. It has made trouble for me—"

He paused abruptly; then as abruptly added:

"By Jove! I have it!"

He had remembered the girl of the river cottage, and had, indeed, grasped a part of the mystery.

"She's the only 'Nina' around here, and it must be she that wrote this rubbish, but who is it she loves so deeply?"

He tried in vain to answer his own question.

"Plainly, she don't bestow so much affection on me, even if the note was found at Thornholm. To whom, then, did she write? If I can learn that, I may be able to secure revenge for her contemptuous treatment of me. I'll seek every clown near here whose name begins with R, and if I don't get him into some trouble, it will be because I've lost my cunning. Even yet, I'll have the scornful Nina at my feet!"

He was so elated with this plan that he began to whistle, but, as he thought of seeking the Norcross cottage again, recollection of the specter froze the notes on his lips.

"What in the deuce did I see?" he muttered. "Are there ghosts who walk? My marble father says not, and so do others, but the negroes swear they have seen them. I hope they—are—right!"

He shivered as he remembered the ghostly-faced object at the cottage.

"If it was a living man— Ugh! I won't think of it!"

And he put spurs to his horse and went ahead at a gallop.

Unluckily for Roland, Berenice had not believed a word of his explanation, and she, too, was doing some meditating.

"The letter was written by a lady, and I am going to discover her identity. If I can learn enough to warrant me to break the engagement, I will do it. I accepted Mr. Thornholm's offer at a time when I thought that I did not care for life, but I now see that I have only added to my misery."

She looked thoughtfully at vacancy.

"Was I right or wrong about that other matter? I wish I knew; I wish I could believe— But, anyhow, Roland and I would be an unhappy couple. We have nothing in common."

She rose abruptly, went to the window and looked out. She had no object in doing so, but Fate saw fit to tantalize her.

There was a cloud of dust on the road, and out of this suddenly came Captain Hereford, riding like Tam O'Shanter. One moment he looked at Royalston, and then kept on his way.

"He, always he!" murmured Berenice. "If I forget him for a moment, something brings him to my mind. He comes here no longer, but I think of him—always!"

She watched the receding cloud until it disappeared, and then sighed wearily and rested her head against the casing of the window. Some people called her cold. They did not know how superficially they judged.

"Where will it end?" she wondered. "How much longer can I bear this burden? Every day it grows deeper, heavier, and I cannot forget. Oh! Arthur, why did I live to know so much?—why did chance reveal that which has destroyed my hopes of happiness forever? Better ignorance; better—death!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A NOBLE PLANTER'S AFFAIR OF THE HEART.

ANOTHER night came and went without bringing any noticeable change at Thornholm Lodge.

Nothing further was seen of the mad-woman, but Edward Crapo had selected two of the most brutal negroes on the plantation to accompany Hodge and Tuck in the search for her. They were to be well paid, in any case, while, if they found her—that part of his instructions Crapo gave in a low tone.

It was noticed as a singular fact that Hector, the Newfoundland dog, had suddenly disappeared, and, remembering how he had last seen him, Crapo could not doubt that he had followed the woman in her flight.

It was a singular instance of brute judgment that the dog should constitute himself the companion of her who should have been open mistress of himself and the house which sheltered him.

Roland had never before been so nervous and ill at ease, and, as he wandered around restlessly, more than one of the family suspected that he had quarreled with Berenice. It need scarcely be said, however, that he was thinking of what he had seen at the Norcross cottage.

Veva, on the contrary, was radiant. Her friendly relations with Vincent had been re-established, and it made her noticeably happy.

Her thoughts dwelt much upon the secretary. How good, kind, manly and sensible he was! Veva no longer attempted to hide the truth from herself. She loved him; more than that, her intuitions told her the feeling was mutual.

The idea made her happy, for she saw no reason why they should not unite their fortunes for life if they saw fit.

If he was poor, so was she; if he was obliged to labor daily, so could she; if she was a daughter of Virginia, was he not a son of the same old State?

Such were her thoughts as she made a pretense of rearranging the trifles on a table, unconscious that she was being observed by admiring eyes through the open door.

Crapo had indulged in a stratagem, and the first fruits were visible when his visitor appeared before the conventional hour of calling; she was in a trap.

A slight cough caused her to turn.

Mr. John Jay Lennox was there!

He bowed very low, and, as he straightened, his eyeglass shot out little gleams, which may have been sparks of his ardent affection.

Veva did not hear the words which followed; clearly enough she realized that she was entrapped, and her indignation rose accordingly.

"I will call my father, Mr. Lennox," she said, as she hastened toward the door.

"Wait, wait, wait!" he returned, hurriedly, raising a deprecating hand. "It is you I wish to see, Miss Crapo!"

Veva hesitated. Then her mood changed.

She resolved to hear this odious young man, and, if he troubled her further, it would be because he was invulnerable to things that usually nettled.

"To see me?" she repeated, calmly. "That changes the case. I supposed you had come on business. Pray be seated. Are you planning a pleasure trip, somewhere?"

"Hardly that, at present."

"You men are so reckless I never know what you will do next."

"Do you think me reckless?" asked John Jay, his face beaming with pleasure.

"Dreadfully reckless."

"Oh, no; I always take good care of myself. It is my duty—for the sake of others, if not myself."

This remark did not sound suitable to him, but, as Veva did not smile at it, he soon decided that it was all right.

Any how, the ice was broken, and he continued the conversation so well that, at the end

of five minutes, he was upon his knees and pouring out the story of his burning affection.

In tumultuous words he placed Lennox Manor and himself at her disposal, and the eyeglass quivered and sparkled in eager sympathy.

Not so with Veva; she remained grave and thoughtful.

"I have given this matter some thought, myself," she practically answered, "and several questions are in my mind. Resume your seat, please, and we will proceed with our conversation."

Mr. Lennox was vaguely disappointed, but it was one point gained when she would listen to him.

"I believe," she added, in a business tone, "that you have several relatives?"

"None nearer than cousins, uncles and aunts."

"No class of relatives is more greedy. Have you made a will?"

"A will?" Mr. Lennox echoed, blankly.

"Yes."

"No-o; I haven't—not yet."

"I shall desire you to make one before our marriage!"

"You will?"

"Yes. In case of your death, I should want to hold Lennox Manor, the house in Washington, and enough cash so that I could live in style."

John Jay's eyes were very large. He was startled—horried. After a painful pause he managed to rally.

"I will do it, my dear—that is, Miss Crapo—though I don't intend to die, just now."

"Life is uncertain. Excuse me for referring to the matter, but it is vexatious to be poor. On the other hand, a rich widow is much sought after!"

The lover was simply appalled. Horror brooded darkly upon his face, and he had nothing to say.

"If you don't wish to make a will," calmly continued Miss Crapo, "you might, instead, deed me the Washington house, together with a yearly allowance of fifteen thousand dollars during my lifetime."

It is hard to say whether speaker or listener was the more shocked. It was certainly severe upon Mr. Lennox to hear a charming girl plan, at that delicate hour, how she would live and be "much sought after" as his widow; but Veva, always before careful not to wound the feelings of any one, was mortified and ashamed almost to the point of weeping.

She was not sure the end justified the means.

Lennox drew his handkerchief nervously across his flushed, perspiration-covered face.

"Your views are—are—very correct," he assented, "but as no one should rash to a decision in such a matter, I suggest that we take a month to—to think it over."

"I could not consent to accept a smaller marriage settlement, Mr. Lennox."

"Of course not; of course not!" he agreed, afraid that he would be driven to the decisive point at once. "I was thinking of making it more."

"In that case, I am willing to wait. Let it rest for a month, and, during that time, I will devote myself to no one particular gentleman. I believe I can do as well financially with you as with anybody else."

Somehow, the suitor managed to end the interview after a few more words, and retreat from the room.

Veva was left a prey to mortification and indignation. She knew she had been entrapped deliberately, to listen to him, and this, with shame at her own desperate resort, so affected her that she went to her room and relieved her wounded feelings with tears.

Shocked at her apparent selfishness, John Jay wished to flee from the house, but dared not. He had his orders to return to Crapo. He went.

His prospective father-in-law at once bestowed critical notice upon him.

"What luck, my boy?" he asked, bluffly.

"Very fair, for the first attempt," returned Lennox, trembling before that piercing gaze, but feeling that he must feign cheerfulness to avert a storm.

"Did she consent?"

"Nominally, yes."

"Nominally? That's a queer word to use in such a case. I don't understand. What were her exact words?"

"I don't think she used any," helplessly responded the young planter. "We talked vaguely."

"The dickens you did! I never supposed that 'vagueness' was a characteristic of love, and, even if it is, you are not proposing to me. Suppose you drop your vagueness, now, and talk to the point."

"I hope you approve of my course?" returned Lennox, imploringly.

"What was your course? State it clearly!"

John Jay tried to obey. He felt the need of presenting the case in so favorable a light that Crapo would not fly into a passion and insist upon making Veva give a direct answer, at once—the suitor was now an advocate of delay—

while, at the same time, he dared not show that he was wavering.

He told the story, smoothing it over the best he could. Greatly to his relief, Crapo exhibited no anger.

"It will all end well," declared the schemer. "Women are a little offish, at first, simply to use their power; it's born in them, as in a cat, to tantalize their prey. Men, before marriage, correspond to the mice of the cats. Now, that daughter of mine has her mind all made up, but she wants to have her swing. Let her, John! by all means, let her! Men have to do thus with their sweethearts, but, once they're married—ah! my dear boy, the shoe is then on the other foot! Then the man is lord and master, and he can raise the Old Nick, the rest of his life!"

Cunning Edward Crapo was not in a philosophical mood. Far from it. The fact was, he knew Lennox's weak nature well, saw the need of raising his spirits, and knew how to do it.

John Jay brightened at once.

"Oh! it will be all right," he agreed.

"I'll talk with my daughter, myself, and, in a few days, you shall have a letter with a decisive answer. This delay of a month is absurd."

"Oh! no, no! Don't hasten the matter! Veva needs time—and so do I!"

"You are both too diffident. A wife, like a rifle-pit before a fort, should be taken by storm."

"Yes; but I've heard it said it's terrible destructive to the stormers," observed John Jay, pathetically.

"The more danger, the more glory. Let us abandon metaphor, however. You have begun well, and complete success is merely a matter of a little time. Have no fears as to the result; Veva shall be your wife. I give you my word of honor. As for her coquettishness, it will soon disappear."

All this was so encouraging that the lover forgot Veva's strange language, and became quite cheerful.

Going out of the house, a little later, he met Walter Vincent. He gave the secretary one supercilious stare and passed without a sign of recognition, leaving the object of his hatred very much amused.

Edward Crapo had no sooner freed himself from Lennox's presence than he sent for his daughter. The manner he had preserved in the planter's presence coincided but poorly with what was really in his mind. Outwardly cool, he was inwardly hot with anger.

Veva came, surprisingly calm, but with traces of weeping still visible in her face.

"What has passed between you and Lennox?" Crapo asked, abruptly.

"We have had our last interview, I hope. He gave me a chance to marry him, but, as I have told you before, I do not aspire to the honor."

The father brought his hand down violently upon the table.

"And I have told you that you shall marry him!" was the fierce declaration.

The girl's face became almost colorless, but she did not waver visibly.

"Do you hear?" he continued.

"I do, sir."

"Will you obey?"

"Father, it seems useless for us to speak further upon this subject. We have done so before, freely and fully. I have stated my objections to Mr. Lennox, and they are insuperable. Let us, therefore, drop the subject."

The ice in Crapo's nature again asserted its supremacy.

"As you will," he returned, coldly, "but, if you persist in your determination, you can no longer find shelter under this roof."

"I believe the place is my brother's property, sir."

"Roland will obey me."

"If he does, it will be the first time."

"There is about to be a change at Thornholm, as you shall see. Henceforth, I speak only to be obeyed. I'll show you that I am Roland's master; at my order she will throw you upon the world!"

He spoke with icy determination which made her shiver. More like a judge of the days of the Inquisition he seemed than like a father.

"There are worse things than what you threaten," she answered, after a pause.

"If so, you shall taste the full cup of bitterness, if you defy me. It is for you to say, but be not too hasty. I give you forty-eight hours for reflection. You can go!"

He arose and opened the door; she passed through without a word, and again hastened to her room.

A negro came to Crapo.

"Jobo wants to see you, sah," he announced.

The man of ice started a little. Jobo was one of the negroes he had sent with the swamp outlaws to hunt the mad-woman.

"Show him in," was the response.

CHAPTER XXV.

WHO SHALL BE MASTER?

CRAPRO received the report of his man. It was far from satisfactory, but a clew had been gained. By means of the bound the hunters had followed the trail of the mad-woman into the depths of the swamp which bordered the river off to the southeast.

They had even caught a glimpse of her on the Black Acre, but Hodge and Tuck had refused to venture there, remembering their past experience, while the negroes had no desire to have a first experience.

As a result, the attempt had been abandoned weakly in the very hour of success.

Such cowardice angered Crapo, and he gave his opinion to Jobo in language plain and emphatic, but not wishing to stir his tool up too much, and thereby set a loose tongue to work, he finally dismissed him as graciously as possible.

He, however, had a new idea.

At last he knew where to seek the woman, and before another sun set he would visit the Black Acre!

Once more alone, he arose and paced the room for half an hour. Weighty matters were struggling in his mind—too weighty even for the soothing influence of the Life of Napoleon.

He ended by ringing for a negro, whom he directed to ask Roland to join him. Then he resumed his seat. The brief storm had passed, and he had never been calmer, outwardly.

Roland soon entered and dropped into a chair.

"I hear you want to see me?"

"Yes," Crapo replied. "Did you see Lennox?"

"Not to speak with him."

"He proposed to Veva to-day, and she turned the matter into ridicule."

"She did right!" Roland declared. "He is a ridicule on the name of man; he has neither muscle nor brains."

"Nevertheless, Veva will marry him!"

"That's her business, not mine; but if she is sensible she will send him flying."

"Roland, I want your help in this."

"To make Lennox my brother-in-law? Thank you, no; I'd rather have an alligator. Lennox, if not so dangerous as that reptile, is more ungainly and unsightly."

"I have told Veva that unless she obeys me she shall leave this house. She reminded me that you was its owner. I replied that you would do whatever I said."

"That's cool!" ejaculated Roland. "How do you know I will? You may fight all you wish with the girl on other matters, but in this I'm with her! No John Alligator Lennox for me!"

It was not brotherly affection which influenced Roland, nor wholly dislike for Lennox. He was stubborn, and having learned just what Crapo wished, was prepared to oppose him, while the intimation contained in the elder man's last remark added fuel to the fire.

Crapo did not betray the least uneasiness.

"It was partly to ask your aid in the case that I sent for you," he continued, "and partly to ask for twenty thousand dollars!"

"Twenty thousand dollars!" echoed Roland, blandly.

"Yes."

"For what purpose?"

"As a gift from you to myself."

Roland laughed.

"You are a modest duck! Don't a life residence here satisfy your ambition?"

"I may wish to leave, in which case I require the means."

"And you want twenty thousand for pocket-money? You'll excuse me; I don't care to make such a gap in my resources."

"Your fortune amounts to a million."

"Yes; and I'm going to keep it up to that point."

"I must again make the request," coldly uttered Crapo.

"See here!" cried Roland, irritably, "what are you driving at? You talk as if I were your creditor!"

"So you are; you owe me over half a million—the value of Thornholm when it passed into your hands."

"I see!" declared the younger man, sarcastically. "You are jealous because old man Thornholm gave me his whole pile, and left you in the cold. Well, as I was only an infant, it wasn't my fault. You ought to be satisfied with a home like this."

"But I want a gift of twenty thousand dollars!"

Edward Crapo, as composed as ever, kept his gaze fixed upon his companion and spoke each word slowly and distinctly. His face was unreadable, but Roland grew freshly irritable.

"You can't have it!" he declared.

"I must!"

"I say you shall not!"

"And I say I will!"

The master of Thornholm grew red with anger.

"What in the fend's name do you mean? Are you mad? Thornholm is mine, and no man can insult me and remain under its roof. Drop the subject!"

"I will—when I get the money."

"You can live and die calling for it!"

From the first there had been no trace of anger or excitement in Crapo's voice or manner, but, nevertheless, each told of a fixed purpose. He watched Roland steadily, and without mercy. He knew what the other did not—that it was a struggle to see who would be master. He had intentionally tantalized his victim until the lat-

ter was angry and nervous; now, he was ready for the climax.

He spoke with additional deliberation:

"Roland Thornholm, your future is at stake. For a score of years you have been absolute ruler here, little dreaming that there was a power behind the throne; little dreaming that I, who was so maliciously cut off from Robert Allan Thornholm's money, could drop you from your proud position whenever I saw fit. Of course I did not see fit, for my interests demanded that you remain; but, if the time has come when you are no longer useful to me, I will deprive you of your last dollar and send you out into the world a beggar!"

Still the calm, unruffled voice and manner, and, preposterous as it seemed, Roland feared that he spoke the truth. But the planter forced an unpleasant laugh.

"How will you do that? How can you do it?"

"By proving that you are not Roland Thornholm!"

"Nonsense!"

"Not a drop of Crapo or Thornholm blood is in your veins!"

"It is a base lie!" shouted Roland.

"Not so loud! Do you want others to hear me speak your doom? Pay attention to me, and leave ranting alone. I tell you that the boy master of this plantation, grandson of Robert Allan Thornholm, and son of myself and my wife Rosalind, died nearly twenty years ago, in Cuba. The same grave covered both him and his mother!"

"Tis false!" asserted the listener, hoarsely.

"It is true. A week ago I had the papers which proved the double death, but they have been stolen from me, and I suspect that the thief intends to use them for the purpose I say the papers can accomplish—to prove that the real heir died in childhood."

"Then, in the thief's name, who am I?"

"The son of a street-singer I met in Savannah. My own son was dead, and, knowing Thornholm was lost forever unless I presented some one in his place, I gave five hundred dollars to a man that was singing in the streets, accompanied by a ragged, dirty child; and thereby became possessor of the child—yourself!"

Edward Crapo paused, and no sound broke the silence save the heavy breathing of the false master of Thornholm.

His face was pale, and, though unwilling to admit the fact, he was compelled to believe what he had heard.

But he would not yield tamely.

"Prove it!" he finally cried.

"I cannot prove how I found you, for I left the street-singer without learning his name or yours; but, if you will go to Cuba, you can see the record of my real son's death. You may see it all too soon unless I regain my own lost papers from the thief."

"Who is the thief?"

"I must decline to state."

"Perhaps the person is your ally, and—"

"So far from that, unless I recover the papers, I shall get out of the United States with all possible haste."

"What horrible mystery is this?" Roland muttered.

"Leave the mystery alone!" Crapo replied, sharply. "Leave me to deal with that, and rest assured that I shall work well for you as long as our interests are identical. Look you to what is clear! I have shown you why I want the twenty thousand dollars—to flee the country if hard pressed—and, as for yourself, see to it that you have an abundance of cash always on hand. If you see the rats scampering over the deck, desert the sinking ship."

"If I had proof—"

"Would you believe if I should show you the papers I mention and, proving them genuine, let you read the death-certificate of my real son?"

"Of course."

"Then let that be the proof. I'll produce it. I must, or we are ruined; I must, even though the road to victory is reddened by murder!"

Crapo whispered the last word, and Roland shivered in horror. What a change the hour had made! It was almost too strange and horrible for belief, but he read sincerity in his companion's every way.

His companion! That was all Crapo was to him. No tie of blood bound them. He was neither a Crapo nor a Thornholm. He was—What? Who?

Simply a man without a name!

"I have faith in you, and will pull together," he finally said, more firmly. "I'll stand by the man who has given me twenty years of luxury. The money you want is yours. We are friends and allies; map out our future course."

"If I can avert the danger, two things must be hastened forward to completion—your marriage to Berenice, and Veva's with Lennex."

"Right; I now see the wisdom of the last scheme."

"And, if she rebels, she shall leave Thornholm!"

"She shall!" asserted Roland, firmly.

"Good! Now, look to your own lady-love. Arthur Hereford loves her."

"Hereford?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I am not blind."

"I'll kill the scoundrel!"

"Be sure he is dangerous, first. I have read him well, but can't say how she feels. Be careful!"

"I'll be prudent, for, if Thornholm is lost, I'll shoot myself. I'm not capable of earning my bread. A street-singer's son! Zounds! that sounds well!"

Crapo rose, went to one side and, returning, laid on the table a long-bladed knife.

"What's that?" Roland asked, with a start.

"I'm about to seek the person who stole my papers," was the icy reply, "and this weapon is necessary."

"Would you—"

"I would silence the thief, as well as regain the papers. I say this boldly. When I put you inside Thornholm I confided in no one, but, now, we must work together; we are accomplices. I think I can rely on you?"

"You can, come what may!"

They crossed hands; the compact of crime was sealed. Accomplices they were from that hour, and neither shrunk from the work that might come.

Crapo again took up the knife, and, as he turned away, spoke with cold significance:

"I will now seek the thief!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE STRUGGLE AT BLACK ACRE.

ROLAND watched stolidly as Crapo prepared for departure, untroubled by the sight of the knife he saw his companion put in his pocket. The bond of crime had made them nearer, if not dearer, to each other than ever before; their hopes and plans were to the same end; and each mind was corrupt enough not to shrink from the terrible means of safety.

After leaving the house Crapo used some strategy to cover his movements from possible observers, but finally bore around to the Black Acre swamp.

Entering, he trod that wretched region, avoiding alike the treacherous pools and deadly serpents that menaced his safety.

The thunder began to roll; dark clouds gathered above the trees, smutting out the heavens; and the thick foliage cast gloomy obscurity over the swamp, but Crapo was not superstitious enough to be influenced by what a more timid man might have thought suggestive signs of Divine condemnation.

He approached the Black Acre.

He now became cautious. He knew the danger, and was anxious to guard his life. He began the passage, selecting a point skillfully, and then moving inch by inch with great care.

Improving the decaying logs and upright trees as others had done before him, he finally stood in safety on the Black Acre.

Feeling in his pocket, he found his knife secure. He ascended the side of the knoll. He was among the pines, and his feet pressed noiselessly upon the fallen needles. Creeping along like an Indian, he looked eagerly for the mad-woman. The semi-darkness of the wood was against him, but the Black Acre was small, and he could not long be at fault.

Discovering the hut at last, he paused and looked eagerly. He felt sure that he would find her there.

There! What a resting-place, a home, for her who should have been the mistress of Thornholm that day! The wretched, decaying hut looked as if a breath of wind would beat it into a flattened mass.

For several minutes Crapo remained silent and still; then he crept toward the hut. His iron face showed no change, except that his lips were tightly drawn. Once he paused to draw the knife from his pocket and thrust it up his sleeve, with the handle resting in the palm of his hand.

Ominous preparation!

He reached the door of the hut and peered in. The darkness there would have been great had not some light penetrated through crevices in the miserable roof.

One ghostly gleam fell upon a sleeping person.

It was the mad-woman!

She lay partially upon her side, one arm thrown forward and resting in her tangled hair. Her slumber seemed peaceful, but she was as ragged and wretched as ever.

Crapo drew a quick, deep breath. The moment and the chance for which he had longed had come; the climax, apparently, for him to win his battle with a criminal's soul as over men perpetrated.

He did not waver.

Turning his knife ready for use, he glided through the door and toward the sleeping woman. His cautious footstaps made no betraying sound; the unhappy woman slept on calmly.

One step more and—

There was a savage growl; the rush of something large and dark from the remoter shadow; a start and a leap on Crapo's part, and then he found himself lying at full length on the ground, with what he thought to be a wild animal standing over him.

Alarm seized upon him. He had lost his knife; he was helpless. But a second look showed that he had made one mistake.

The animal was Hector, the dog.

Hope revived.

"Hector! Good fellow; good fellow!" he murmured, coaxingly.

The dog remained deaf to the call. Crapo put out a hand to caress Hector's head, but the latter turned stolidly, walked toward the mad-woman, and crouched in front of her bed of boughs.

The would-be murderer hastened to regain his feet. His intended victim had risen to a sitting position, and was gazing at him confusedly, brushing the tangled hair back from her eyes.

"I'll move before she recognizes me!" thought Crapo.

He looked for his knife, and saw it lying on the ground just in front of Hector. Forgetting all else, he advanced to secure it, but, with an ominous growl, Hector rose and stood with exposed teeth, the coveted knife directly between his feet.

Crapo paused abruptly. He knew Hector of old; he had seen him go to battle when his usually placid nature was disturbed; and he had no wish to defy the strength which lay in those jaws, shoulders and limbs.

There was, he thought, a safer way.

"Good fellow! Good old boy!" he uttered, in those peculiar tones one usually adopts to win the good-will of a dog. "Noble Hector!"

He put out his hand, but the dog growled again, and a warning light appeared in his eyes.

Angered, Crapo made a dive for the knife, but the brute guardian met him with a responsive forward leap, and the schemer was driven back to the door, baffled and furious.

Hector returned to his position by the knife, while Crapo stood still and expressed his view of the situation in language more emphatic than elegant.

By this time, too, the mad-woman had recovered from her confusion, and, as she stood erect, the visitor saw that he was recognized.

"Hol! hol!" she cried; "so you have come to my wild-wood bower? So you've come to return my visit? You are welcome; Hercules and I are glad to see you!"

Crapo did not answer. He looked from the woman to the dog, his anger at white heat. Hector, watching him with ceaseless vigilance, stood as firm as though bound to deserve the new name she had given him.

Now that it was too late, the plotter keenly regretted not having brought a pistol.

"Why are you so silent?" continued the woman. "You were not so mute when you pursued me at Thornholm. I see a knife on the ground. So you attempted to kill me, my Lord Edward? It is useless; Hercules is here!"

She pointed to the dog, and, in every word and look, Crapo saw signs of a degree of sanity which was very dangerous.

Deranged she still was, but, in the presence of others, she could tell a story which would do him no good, to say the least.

"You are mistaken," he replied, changing his manner. "I have come as your friend."

She laughed mockingly.

"I don't care to have that kind of friendship. Yonder knife speaks plainly. You wished to kill me so that I would not appear and drive you out of Thornholm—you and your precious family; so that I would not point to the master of the Lodge and say: 'This is an impostor!'"

"Roland an impostor?" echoed Crapo, with a pretense of surprise. "What do you mean?"

"That the vulture is in the eagle's nest. The man who is called Roland is no Thornholm; he is an impostor picked up by you after you received the certificate of the death of the real heir!"

It was worse than the schemer had thought; this woman knew enough to ruin him. He was full of fear, anger and hatred, but resolved to proceed with increased caution.

Gently he answered:

"I also received a certificate of your own death."

She touched the bosom of her ragged dress.

"Yes; I have it here!"

His eyes glittered covetously.

"How did this error occur?" he asked.

"I don't know; I was mad."

"And our son—did you see him die?"

A cunning expression came to her face.

"Hal! ha!" she laughed; "you think, Edward Crapo, that my head is a sieve from which you can draw all you want to know. Give up the hope, at once; I'll tell nothing!"

Providentially, the woman guarded her secret even in her deranged state.

Crapo's gaze wandered to Hector.

"How did that dog chance to follow you?" he asked, absently.

"Doubtless, he saw that I was wretched and in need of aid. Be that as it may he is my protector."

She knelt by the Newfoundland and put her arm around his neck. He manifested pleasure, but, as Crapo stirred slightly, menaced him with a growl and fierce front.

"Send the brute away; I want to talk with you," continued the schemer, abruptly.

"You want to get your knife and murder me."

"I give you my word of honor—"

"Your word of honor!" was the sarcastic retort.

"I tell you that if you'll send him away—"

"Hercules remains with me!"

Crapo was in a rage. The knife remained at the dog's feet, and an attempt to secure it might result fatally to the man. In an open-handed encounter with Hector he would be like a mere child.

He scowled upon the pair. Both watched him vigilantly. The arm of the one remained around the other's neck, but it was not a restraining hold. At a word from her the dog would leap to the attack.

Crapo had not been his friend, in the past; now, he was not Crapo's friend.

The latter turned, stalked out of the hut, and, under the trees, looked for a weapon of offense. Stones there were none, but he soon found a strong pine branch, heavy and sodden, which suited him well.

"If I can get one good blow with this at the brute, he will never know what hurt him. What cursed luck! He remembers divers kicks I gave him on the plantation grounds, and his instinct is as good as reason. But I'll fix him with this. Then for the mad-woman!"

He returned to the hut.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DOG DEFENDER.

HECTOR greeted Crapo's return with a growl, and followed every movement with wary eyes. He saw the stick and knew its purpose, apparently, but instead of cowering, grew yet fiercer in his aspect.

The noble animal had never looked grander; he had never before been in work so grand.

Balancing the club in a suitable manner. Crapo crept forward. The dog's growl increased in volume.

"Back!" cried the mad-woman, wildly; "back, or there will be a sea of blood!"

Crapo did not heed her. Gathering all his strength, and aiming at Hector's head, he swept the club through the air.

Quicker than his own movements were those of his opponent. Evading the blow he leaped like a panther at the man's throat, and the impetus of his heavy body bore Crapo to the ground.

His club had fallen well away; he lay helpless, with the jaws of the noble animal yawning above him.

The guilty wretch closed his eyes, expecting to feel the fatal touch, but it did not come. There was a painful pause; then he opened his eyes and looked up.

The dog seemed hesitating as to whether he would make an end of him.

The mad-woman was greatly excited. She stood erect and, flinging her gray hair around her wildly, laughed loudly and unnaturally.

Crapo hardly dared to breathe, but, once more, Hector abandoned the advantage he had gained and retreated to his former position.

Then the woman evinced a disposition to take up the gauntlet of war.

Grasping the knife with one hand she twined the fingers of the other in the dog's shaggy hair, and, much to his satisfaction, drew him toward their common enemy.

"Keep off!" Crapo ordered. "Back, I say; you come to your death!"

"Ha! ha!" she laughed; "it is our turn, now. You have twice tried and failed; now see if we can do better. Watch him, Hercules; watch him!"

The Newfoundland growled savagely, and before his ominous front Crapo's courage fled. He hurriedly left the hut.

"Hol! he flees!" exclaimed the woman. "Follow, Hercules, and we will crush this worm!"

Then the plotter, who had paused a few feet away, saw them come out with a rush. His courage was beyond question, but common prudence demanded prompt retreat.

He had seen enough of Hector.

He turned and fled as from a panther, and, as he hastened down the slope, the allies followed in hot pursuit.

As the wretch remembered what was before him his heart shrunk. One of his pre-arranged ways of getting rid of the mad-woman had been to drive her into the quicksand or marsh.

Now, he was apparently being hurried to the same terrible fate.

It was a race for life, and the maniacal laughter of the woman urged him on. Hector was very silent, but when Crapo looked behind, once, he clearly read in the dog's manner that, if he secured another chance, he would not stay his strong jaws.

Being urged on by the woman, he was eager to do his worst.

The treacherous footing was reached. Crapo had a lead of forty feet. With a fear he had never before felt in his life he made a dash where the half-sunken logs seemed the most numerous.

His first step was a success, and so was the second, but, at the third, one leg went into the mud to the knee.

A great effort saved him, and he kept on in safety.

Agility and sheer desperation carried him forward, and, at last, he stood on the other side.

Looking back, he saw his pursuers more slowly crossing, and he started off at a run. It would not do to stop and see what they would do after getting over.

He ran at speed new in his experience for many years.

"But I'll get at them again!" he thought, darkly. "I'll go back and get a pistol—then I'll try again!"

Walter Vincent saw Crapo leave the house, and soon after Roland took his gun and started toward the eastern wood.

This pleased the secretary. It will be remembered that at the interview with his mother at the Norcross cottage he declared, led by her advice, that he would seek in Crapo's private room for the papers he had failed to find during his search of the old cabinet.

The hour for the attempt was at hand. He knew Crapo always kept the room locked during his absence, and as he had found a key that would turn the bolt, there was not much danger of interruption.

He could lock himself in, and no one was likely to come near.

He did not go about the task with any great pleasure. In his career as a detective he had been compelled to resort to sundry stratagems, like other detectives, but he had become a man entirely different from the original "Dangerous Dave."

The very walls of the old house where the Thornholms had lived for so many years before Crapo's day seemed to point an example speaking of strictest honor, and when he would have acted simply as a detective he found himself thinking like a man in private life.

Yet invade Crapo's room he felt that he must, and he lost no time in going about it.

He was soon in the room, with the door locked behind him.

The place spoke plainly of Edward Crapo's occupancy. Luxuriously fitted up as far as carpet and furniture went, it was entirely devoid of bric-a-brac and finer ornamentation.

Vincent gave these things but a casual glance.

A trunk stood in one corner, but as he saw that it was not locked, he turned his attention to the bureau. The drawers were soon searched, but not a paper of value to him was found.

Plainly, the trunk was the last resort.

On approaching it he saw with some surprise that the lock had been broken, but he began the examination without delay.

It need scarcely be said that he was not successful; the all-important papers were even then in the mad-woman's possession.

Vincent, little dreaming what strange scenes had occurred in the life of the unfortunate Rosalind since he last saw her, was greatly disappointed, but he did not despair.

Previous detective experience had shown him that courage and perseverance could do many things.

He arranged everything as near as possible as he had found them, and left the room, locking the door behind him.

"I'll visit the cottage this afternoon," he thought.

He was leaving the house when he was accosted by Veva Crapo.

"Pardon me, Mr. Vincent," she said, with unusual seriousness, "but, if you are not in haste, I would like half an hour of your time."

"An hour, or more, if you wish, Miss Crapo."

"Then let us walk where we shall be alone."

It was plain that some trouble was oppressing her, and he became sympathetic, at once, only to recollect that he would soon deal her a blow which would blight her whole after life.

"Heaven pity her!" he thought, helplessly.

Once under the old trees that were such friends to both, they went to a bench, but Veva did not speak at once.

Her fair face bore a look of sadness, and it went straight to Vincent's heart.

He loved this girl! He—but it was madness; the maddest of all things! He must turn his back on all; he must not be even a friend to one who must some time hate him.

She broke the silence at last.

"I am in trouble, Mr. Vincent, and feel the need of an adviser. Perhaps I have done wrong in coming to you, but I have faith in your honor and your judgment."

"You can command me, Miss Crapo."

"My father, I believe, told you that I was to marry Mr. Lennox?"

"Yes."

"Such are his wishes, but I have repeatedly told both him and Mr. Lennox that I cannot consent. I need not argue the matter; it is enough that Mr. Lennox is very disagreeable to me. Despite all I have said, Mr. Crapo declares that I shall marry the gentleman or leave Thornholm forever."

"Impossible!" cried the secretary, impulsively.

"Unfortunately, it is both possible and true."

Such were his words, and he intends to keep the threat."

"This is serious, indeed," agreed Vincent, grasping blindly for some way of escape.

"I shall never marry John Jay Lennox—never! What, then, am I to do? Clearly, I must leave Thornholm, but I am thinking of a way to forestall and baffle Mr. Crapo. I am going to Washington."

"You have friends there, then?"

"No. I must depend upon myself."

The detective was alarmed. Far better than his companion he knew how dreary a struggle was the fight of a young woman to gain subsistence in a large city.

"Alone and friendless!" he murmured.

"But full of courage!"

Their eyes met, hers calmly resolute, but free from boasting courage; his, tender, sympathetic, doubtful and troubled.

She was going out into the selfish, grasping world; the world which was as merciless as the jungle tiger; and she was his father's daughter—his own half-sister.

"It shall not be!" he exclaimed. "I will protect you!"

Her cheeks flushed with grateful joy.

"You?"

"I!"

He meant it all, but his manliness seemed to shrink the next instant. He remembered the fatal secret which he must divulge when he produced Rosalind Thornholm Crapo, alive.

He her protector, when she was fated to suffer more keenly at his hand than she could by any act of Edward Crapo's!

The light of happiness was in her eyes.

"You are very kind, but—but—"

She paused, at a loss how to express what was in her mind, but the very bitterness of the situation calmed him. He had made an offer hastily. How could he retreat from it?

Why should he retreat? Why should he not protect her? If fate compelled him to darken her life, was that any reason why he should turn against her utterly?

If he raised the storm, why not offer a harbor.

He answered steadily:

"I have a home, humble though it be, and a sister who will receive you kindly. She is good and true. Will you accept a place in her heart and in her home?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHAT VINCENT FOUND IN THE SWAMP.

"You are very kind!"

Veva made the reply with a glad light in her eyes. She was asked to share Vincent's home, to be the companion of his sister, and these facts, together with words and looks in the past on his part, well remembered by her, changed her whole expression.

"While there," added the secretary, "your only associates will be my sister and—our father—but I shall feel it my duty to call, now and then, and inquire after my ward."

Strangely enough, he laid out the chart of the future in good faith; in his anxiety to supply a home for Veva, he ignored all else.

Veva did not decline the offer. It had made her so happy that she, too, ignored much that others might have remembered, and she accepted gladly and gratefully.

"I am going to see my sister, immediately," Vincent went on. "I have been neglecting her, I fear, and will do so no longer. While there, I will make arrangements in due form so you can go over in two or three days."

The interview was soon ended, and he hastened away toward the southeast.

"How good and noble he is!" thought the unsuspecting girl. "How he seeks to make me happy! Perhaps he is selfish in doing so, and—I hope he is! He is to be trusted fully. No treacherous or unworthy thought ever entered his mind!"

Meanwhile, the man she had eulogized was reviewing his own conduct.

At first it looked like adding insult to injury to offer the shelter of his home when he was about to deprive her even of a name, but second thought convinced him that, with no other means of reparation in his power, it was his duty to give all the care and tenderness that could be sifted from the dark drama.

"If I can't spare her own feelings I will, at least, save her from the merciless world. She shall have a home somewhere, with all that love and money, and honest devotion, can supply. How weak I am now! how unlike a detective! Men of my profession would not be so like iron if the cases they handled were their own!"

He was hastening through the swamps, and was well advanced to the cottage, when, passing the cover of a thicket, he came upon a strange scene.

Upon a little elevation, a few yards away, stood Captain Norcross, and, confronting him, a big, shaggy dog crouched with exposed teeth and hostile front, ready to spring upon the ex-sailor upon the least provocation.

The dog was Hector, and Vincent was at a loss, at first, to understand the cause of his hostility.

Further survey furnished the explanation.

Back of Hector a woman was half-reclining upon a log; a woman whose garments were a mass of rags, and over whose face and shoulders floated disheveled hair which seemed never to have known the use of comb or brush.

The observer suddenly grew pale.

The woman was the unfortunate wanderer, and position and appearance showed that she was either unconscious or dead. It was a startling sight, for he had supposed her safe and well at the cottage, and the shock rendered him momentarily incapable of motion.

Captain Norcross's voice rose in pathetic complaint.

"Oh! can't you understand anything? Shiver my timbers! if you ain't worse than a cabin-boy on his first voyage! Here I've told you in plain words that I'm a friend, but you're as deaf as a post!"

The detective saw that the dog was bound to protect the insensible woman, or die in her defense.

Hector's loyalty had undergone no change since the adventure on Black Acre.

Vincent broke the spell and hastened forward. Norcross saw him at once, and his rugged face lighted up, but that was not the only sign of welcome. Hector was not slow to recognize the new-comer, and his fierce aspect gave place to one of joy.

"Is she dead?" Vincent asked, breathlessly.

"I don't think so, but the dog wouldn't let me go near her. I've been trying a long time—"

The detective did not hear the rest. He had hastened to his mother's side, and was looking with fear and trembling for the answer to his own question.

"She lives!" he cried; "she has only fainted!"

"Providence be thanked!" murmured the old sailor, brokenly.

"But, great heavens! why is she here, and again clad in these miserable rags?"

"She ran away, my boy."

"And is she again—mad?"

"Of course she was when she went, but, why can't she be brought around again? You know the doctor said that, if she had a relapse, it would be mild, for she was bound to get her reason back, if nothing serious happened."

"Why didn't you send me word?"

"Oh! I thought I'd look, myself, first."

The noble old captain had searched until he was nearly exhausted, himself, but he tried to draw attention from that subject by suggesting that they carry Mrs. Crapo to the cottage at once. She had fainted from hunger and hardship, but even Vincent could see that her condition was not hopeless.

They lifted and bore her away, while Hector leaped around them and barked his joy in dog fashion.

"There's an animal out of a million!" declared the ex-sailor, admiringly. "I was mighty mad at him when you showed up, for, even when I chanced upon them, he wouldn't let me come near her; but I reckon he has a heart of oak. Funny, though, why he let you have your way!"

"He knows me of old."

Vincent's mind went in fancy, for a moment, to the many walks Hector had taken with him and Veva, but soon returned to the present scene.

What if his mother should not recover?

The possibility made him shiver; he would not think of it.

The short distance to the cottage was soon traversed. The home-coming was at once pleasant and sad, for Nina and Maggie could not believe that any hope remained; but, just as they had arranged the wanderer in bed, the doctor unexpectedly arrived and took charge of the case.

He worked so well that, in a short time, Maggie came to Vincent with the report that the unfortunate had regained consciousness and was in her right mind, but the doctor prudently gave her a sleeping-powder and prohibited unnecessary conversation.

He was emphatic in his assertion that, in all probability, she would progress favorably, and, deeply interested, he remained to watch and care for her.

When her wretched garments had been removed a package of papers had fallen out. Maggie had then cast all aside quickly, but she finally brought the package to Vincent.

He examined the papers curiously, and soon became deeply interested.

They were, first, the death-certificates from Cuba; second, the marriage-certificate; and, third, other papers of unquestionable value.

The detective was astonished. How had they come into his mother's possession? He was sure she had not had them previous to her relapse.

He started as the conviction came to him that she had entered the Thornholm mansion and taken them away. He remembered how her mind had dwelt upon the conviction that they would be found in Crapo's trunk; he remembered the broken lock of that trunk.

It was a startling discovery, and he wondered how the work had been done. Then he suddenly recollected the evening, when in his room, he had heard a sound as if of a strug-

gle—something he had then attributed to the servants.

Was it then the papers had been taken? Had the mad-woman gone there and encountered some one else? He thought of Crapo's sudden hunting freak with fresh concern.

"By heavens! I believe the arch-plotter has an inkling of the truth. This complicates matters, and calls for haste in our crusade. So be it; the blow shall fall speedily. Justice shall not be delayed!"

As he thought this a shadow fell on the floor, and, looking up, he saw Berenice Royalston at the door.

It was a mutual surprise, but with her the emotion was slight, and she smiled while he yet stood looking blankly and suspiciously. What had brought her there?

"Why, Mr. Vincent," she said, lightly, "I did not expect to meet an acquaintance here."

The remark deepened the mystery; he was more than ever puzzled to know why she came.

"Those who live here are my friends," he replied, quietly.

"Indeed! Then, perhaps, you can tell me if there is a Miss Norcross here—Nina Norcross?"

"She is in the next room. Shall I inform her that you wish to see her?"

"If you will, Mr. Vincent."

"Please be seated, Miss Royalston. I'll go, at once."

She complied with the invitation, and he passed inside to see his sister. A word of caution might be necessary before she talked too freely with the visitor.

He had always felt deep respect for Berenice, but she was Roland's betrothed, and, as all fair faces were not reliable, it might be she had visited the cottage as a spy for the rulers of Thornholm.

All this he explained to Nina, but she was far from shrinking from the ordeal. She had the brave nature that was a Thornholm birthright, and she resolved that if the fine lady of Royalston had come as an enemy, she would outwit her in a contest of minds.

"I don't like to think ill of her, but, if she asks about our mother, deny all knowledge of a lonely wanderer," cautioned Vincent. "Edward Crapo must not trap us."

"This woman will get no clew from me," Nina declared, steadily.

She went out and confronted Berenice.

The latter rose at once.

They regarded each other in curiosity and hostility as only women can. It was a war of glances!

CHAPTER XXX.

THE FRENCHMAN STRUGGLES TO GAIN LIGHT.

THERE was inquisitive inquiry with both, but the hostility was all on Nina's side. After the first sharp, curious survey, Berenice smiled kindly and graciously, and her companion felt her doubts and enmity melt away.

Many persons had declared that Miss Royalston was cold and proud, but none had ever denied that she could be charming when with those for whom she felt friendship.

Nina looked deeper than the surface, and was favorably impressed at once.

On her own part the heiress saw a girl who, despite her lowly surroundings, had every mark which goes to stamp one of noble and refined nature. Hence Berenice's smile was impulsive, and she kindly explained:

"I was looking for Miss Norcross."

"I am Nina Norcross."

"Then my search is ended, and I am sure we shall be friends. My name is Berenice Royalston."

"I am pleased to see you, though I will say frankly that the call was unexpected."

"Very likely, and, on my part, I had never heard of you until very recently. Of course you are wondering why I am here, and I will hasten to explain. Pardon me if I act my nature and begin with an abrupt question: Are you acquainted with a gentleman named Roland Thornholm?"

Nina flushed.

"I have seen the—Mr. Thornholm, I mean."

"I hope you will not think me too presuming if I venture to ask more concerning him. First, however, I will be frank and say that I am—his promised wife. I thought I had reason to believe he was acquainted with you."

"You are mistaken, Miss Royalston, for, though he has twice been at, or near, our cottage, I don't like him well enough to be an acquaintance."

Nina spoke with considerable emphasis as she remembered the persecution of the man to whom they referred, and Berenice was convinced.

"I've been absurd, but I accidentally became the possessor of a note which I thought was written by you, and to— But you shall see!"

She extended the paper as she spoke, and one glance was enough for Nina to identify it.

"You are right in one respect, Miss Royalston," she admitted, quietly. "I wrote this note, but not to Mr. Thornholm, nor does it in any way refer to him."

"Then I have been very absurd."

Berenice spoke in a tone of disappointment, but, after a little meditation, looked up suddenly.

"I am afraid you will be angry, Miss Norcross, but will you tell me why you don't like Mr. Thornholm?"

Nina was observing, and had become impressed with the idea that the visitor would be glad to learn something not favorable to Roland; and also, she remembered hearing Vincent say that Berenice was too noble a girl for Roland.

"You are his betrothed, Miss Royalston," she suggested.

"I am not sure that I am glad of that fact," replied Berenice, with some embarrassment. "I certainly would like to know him thoroughly."

Nina could doubt no longer, and, in a simple, quiet way, she told how Roland had tried to force his attentions upon her.

Berenice listened in silence, but the increase of color in her face indicated that trouble was brewing for some one.

"Miss Norcross," the heiress made answer, "you do not know how grateful I am for your frankness. I engaged myself to Mr. Thornholm in a moment of—of—well, I may say, of recklessness; and have more than once doubted the wisdom of my course. Now that I know him capable of persecuting one of my sex, I shall not hesitate to break the engagement!"

There was relief in her voice and expression, and Nina did not seek to excuse Roland.

"Do you know," Berenice abruptly added, "that you remind me very much of a gentleman I know?"

"Indeed! May I ask who it is?"

"Mr. Vincent!"

Nina remembered her brother's warning, and was momentarily confused, but she arose and replied:

"He must hear you say that himself."

Going to the door of the inner room, she called the detective, who came at once, and then she repeated the remark.

"The resemblance loses its strangeness," he gravely remarked, "when it is known that Nina and I are sister and brother."

"Is it possible?"

"Possible and true."

"But your surnames are not alike."

"Captain Norcross was a second husband," Vincent responded, ambiguously.

Berenice found herself interested in this family of the wood, but the day was fast drawing to an end, and it would not do for her to delay. She asked permission to call upon Nina again, and then Vincent escorted her to the river, where two negroes were waiting with a boat.

When she was gone he remembered, for the first time, his promise to make a home for Veva at the cottage. He shrunk sensitively from speaking on the subject, fearful that Nina would suspect his mad love, but, summoning all of his resolution, he told the story with unruffled calmness. He explained how kind and noble Veva was, and Nina was convinced, without gaining the dreaded suspicion.

She had taken a natural dislike to the girl who was filling the place rightfully her own, but she had faith in her brother's judgment.

"Let her come, by all means," was the reply; and Vincent had never cared more for his sister than then.

At that moment the doctor came out of Mrs. Crapo's room.

"Will you go in and see our Frenchman?" he asked, addressing Vincent. "I feel sure of the lady's case and can almost swear she will fully recover, but the man is a puzzle. He is on his feet, but has the mind of an infant."

"Will not strength of mind come with strength of body?" asked the detective.

"That is what I hope for. Maggie Warner tells me that the man walked outside the cottage, this morning, and took notice of objects around him."

"He did," Nina added. "He looked at the trees and river, muttered a little, and appeared to take childish pleasure in them."

"I can see no reason why he should not recover fully," continued the doctor. "Desperately ill as he has been, his mind ought not to be permanently affected."

"I'll go in and see him," replied Vincent.

They entered.

The nameless Frenchman, still pale, but looking much better than he had formerly done, sat by a window, absently watching a bird in a neighboring tree. He turned his head quietly, and then brushed his hand across his forehead, as if dark shadows were lurking there. The doctor, however, noticed that his eyes had grown brighter and sharper.

"Ah! my friend, how are we?" the medical man asked.

"I am quite well, but—but, do I know you? Your face is familiar, but I can't remember where I've seen you."

The doctor was elated. His patient not only spoke with a degree of coherence, but had, for the first time, used English.

"My name is Marston, but you now have the advantage of me. I've seen you frequently, but I don't know your name."

The unknown hesitated, and then again put his hand to his forehead.

"This is strange; I can't think of my name. What does it mean? Am I losing my memory?"

"Oh! no; not in the least; such things frequently occur. Let me see your pulse, please."

Marston had no desire to have his patient worry himself over a name, as yet. There was a marked gain, and he must be saved from all excitement.

The Frenchman quietly submitted to an examination, while Vincent watched him thoughtfully. Who was the man, and what his story? From the time when Captain Norcross drew him from the river, senseless and nearly dead, he had never spoken a name. He had muttered vaguely in French, and that was all.

What was the history of the knife-wound that had so nearly taken his life? It might have been a case of attempted suicide, but that was not probable. Some dark drama might be connected with it; perhaps some case which involved high-born persons; but, judging by the rank in life to which the man evidently belonged; it was more likely that he had been the victim of a mere broil.

The detective's practical conclusion received a blow as the Frenchman suddenly raised his head.

"Do you know Roland Thornholm?" he asked.

Vincent started.

"Yes; there is such a man," replied the doctor. "Are you acquainted with him?"

"I don't know. The name is in my mind, and I think—yes; I'm sure I want to find him. I was searching for him when—when—something happened! Yes; and I believe I did see him, too. When and where? I can't tell. It's in my mind, but, when I try to grasp it, it squirms about like a serpent and is gone!"

"Don't try; all will soon be clear," was the doctor's soothing reply. "Take time!"

Vincent had started forward, anxious to encourage this struggling mind, this transient, clouded gleam of recollection; but he realized the wisdom of the doctor's advice. A great effort then might prove disastrous.

"I think I'll go to sleep," continued the Frenchman, "but, look ye! I don't want Roland Thornholm to know I'm here. My mind is upset, but I feel as if there is something which, if he should learn it, he would try to— But it's gone; all gone!"

He settled back with a hopeless look, and the doctor hastened to give him a sleeping-potion.

"Go to bed, my friend, and you will be all right when you awaken," he urged, and assisted the man to obey the direction.

Vincent looked closely at the Frenchman. What secret was brooding in his darkened mind?—what did he know of Roland Thornholm?

"I can only wait for his own lips and time to tell," was the inevitable decision.

They left the patient alone and went to the main room.

"There is a very perceptible gain," asserted the man of medicine.

"Will it continue?"

"I believe it will."

"But his mind may remain obscured?"

"I see no reason why it should. He had a bad case of brain fever, and the relapse at a critical period nearly carried him off. Now, he is getting some bodily strength, but his mind is uncertain. I look to see a gain there, at once. It may be gradual; it may be sudden—he may rouse from sleep with all his faculties back again. The case is of interest, and I'm glad I yielded to Norcross's wishes and kept utter silence. The man may have a history."

With this remark the speaker took his departure.

Night was near at hand, and Vincent only remained to consult with Nina and Maggie. All felt that the day for striking the blow was close to hand. If Mrs. Crapo again recovered her senses it would be prudent to wait for no more than sufficient bodily strength on her part.

The detective did not doubt that she had been inside the Thornholm mansion, and he had an unpleasant fear that Edward Crapo knew more than was safe.

If he had gained a clew, the wronged woman could find safety only in his downfall.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE OUTLAWS SEEK REVENGE.

VINCENT had gone only a few rods when he heard soft footsteps behind him. Turning, he saw the Newfoundland dog, Hector.

Hector, too, came to a stop, and there was a world of inquiry in the gaze he bent upon the secretary. His big brown eyes were full of interrogation marks, and matters of great import seemed struggling in his honest mind.

A flood of gratitude swept over Vincent. Since his mother was returned to the cottage he had forgotten the dog, but both he and his services, as far as known, were remembered now.

He did not know as yet of that thrilling scene on Black Acre, when Hector had saved the madwoman from instant death, but he had been her companion in her wanderings, and had proved his devotion with the secretary as an eye-witness.

The latter now tried to express his gratitude, and caressed the big animal's shaggy head vigorously.

"Good Hector!" he exclaimed. "Noble fellow! Where would I and my cause be had it not been for your help? How much I owe you I don't know, but your devotion is beyond question. You and I were always good friends, and if I ever win my battle you shall not be forgotten. There shall always be a place in my home for you, Hector, and the best of all things dear to your kind shall be yours!"

It was not to be supposed that Hector understood each word of this grateful address, but he did comprehend the import of part of it.

When, in the past, he saw Vincent taken into Veva's good graces he had opened his own big heart to the secretary. He thought well—very well—of the man, and did not hesitate to make it known.

Now his tail vibrated; he ran out a long tongue to reciprocate in the way of good-will, and in various dog fashions testified that he understood and accepted the situation.

Time was precious, however, and after a short delay Vincent told Hector to follow him and continued on his way.

His thoughts turned upon more important matters, and he did not think of his dumb companion for some time. When he did, and looked for him, the dog had disappeared.

Hector seemed fully capable of caring for himself, and the secretary did not try to find him.

A little further on Vincent had to pass through a pine grove. He was doing this without any thought of danger when he suddenly received a blow which felled him, half-unconscious, to the ground. Before he could rise two men pounced upon him, and in a very short time he was bound and helpless.

Before he had recovered his senses fully he had been tied to a tree and was incapable of decisive motion.

Looking, he saw Drake Hodge and Black Tuck before him.

The outlaws did not improve in looks with the passage of time. When they took their unwilling plunge in the mud at the foot of Black Acre knoll they had been completely coated with dark mud which adhered almost like glue, and constitutional aversion to the process of bathing had led them to let the stuff alone.

The result was that two more disreputable-looking persons had never been seen in Virginia.

Vincent's thoughts were not on their clothes, however; he realized that he was in danger.

The outlaws had received more than one severe, though deserved, lesson at his hands in the past, and their evil, gloating looks, now, indicated that it was with no idle object they had tied him to the tree.

Hodge laughed hoarsely as he saw that the prisoner's mind had become clear.

"Hyar ye be, pretty boy!" he declared.

"What do you mean by tying me up in this way?"

"We mean business; don't we, Blackey?"

"We do, for suah," the negro agreed.

"I demand my liberty, at once!"

"You kin take it out in demandin'."

"Do you refuse to set me free?"

"Bet yer life!"

"What good will it do you to hold me prisoner? I have no money—"

A dark look appeared on Hodge's face, and he roughly interrupted:

"We don't want yer money; we couldn't use it if we had it. We want *you*!"

"Why?"

"We want revenge!"

"Oh! that's where the shoe pinches?"

"It's whar the shoe pinches *you*!"

"What do you intend to do?"

"Pay off old debts! Don't we, Black Tuck?"

The negro burst into loud laughter which, however, had no merriment in it.

"Hi-yi-yi!" he cried. "You are a caution, Brudder Drake; you should be in de Senatorium. Yes, yes, we-uns is gwine to pay off ol' debts!"

"Start the fun, Blackey!"

Hodge whipped out an ugly-looking knife, and Vincent expected that the end was to come at once. But the outlaws did not intend to lose the chance for sport.

Each drew his knife, and they took position a short distance away.

"Now, Blackey!" cried the white outlaw.

The knives whirled through the air, and Vincent expected them to pierce his flesh, but when it was over, the weapons were sticking in the broad tree, one on each side of him, and so close that the handles almost touched his body.

Black Tuck again laughed in his erratic way, but Hodge bent a scowling glance upon their helpless prisoner.

"Ketch on, critter?" he asked. "We are some on the knife-throw; we be! I kin cut a finger-nail off from you an' never draw blood. We are goin' ter show yer skill. We begin light, yer see, but we shall draw our knives nigher as we go on. Later, we'll pin your flesh ter the tree, an' when we hev' hacked yer all up, we'll administer the *cup de grass*. Ketch on."

Vincent was not at a loss to understand.

Only too well he saw that the outlaws, stung

by memory of previous humiliations at his hands, intended to torture him after the style of Indian warfare, and then end the affair by disposing of him forever.

And he was perfectly helpless.

"I warn you not to continue this!" he answered sternly.

"Oh! you do?"

"I do."

"You beg fur mercy, eb?"

"I do not, but I advise you to have mercy on yourselves. If you molest me, your lives will pay the forfeit. Release me!"

Hodge bellowed one hand and held it back of his ear, grotesquely pretending not to have heard. "Hev?"

"Release me!"

"You'll hev ter speak an artom louder fur my ears ain't wot they wuz fur keenness."

"Hi-yi!" laughed Black Tuck. "We-uns is bevin' a pile o' fun out o' dis yere 'fair!'"

"Trow another knife, Blackey!"

Again they took position; again the knives sped to the mark; and one of them actually pinned Vincent's coat sleeve to the tree.

From that time the outlaws let themselves loose from all restraint. They taunted the detective; talked of the fate in store for him; boasted of their past crimes, and, indulging in absurd antics and more absurd words, interspersed the knife-throwing with acrobatic somersets and other freaks.

But not for a moment did their malevolence relax.

As they grew tired of absurdity they evinced a disposition to end the affair, and Hodge ordered Tuck to throw the knives to hit, thereafter.

Again they took their places; again the knives went up; but there was a sudden diversion.

A big dark object appeared from behind a tree, and, a moment later, Hodge was borne to the ground by its weight and the impetus of a spring.

Then he lay sprawling with the new actor in the scene crouched above.

It was Hector!

Hodge was terrified. He was not calm enough to know what manner of a beast had assailed him, and, having lost his knife, he could only lie where he had fallen and await what he thought would be sure death. Fright rendered him speechless.

Black Tuck had prudently retreated, but, when he saw that he had only a dog to contend with, he advanced to the attack, knife in hand. Hector watched him with glittering eyes.

"Whoa, dar!" the negro directed. "Keep skill, an' I'll cut yer—"

Hector sprung at him like a panther. Tuck aimed a blow, missed his aim, and then felt the dog's teeth in his shoulder. He bellowed with pain and terror. Hodge sprung up and tried to take part in the affair, but Hector was ready for him. There was another rush, and the white outlaw went down. Strong teeth closed over his neck, and he fainted with terror.

By that time Black Tuck was in headlong flight. Perhaps Hector realized the situation. He left Hodge and went to Vincent's side; he seized the cords in his teeth and tore at them vigorously; Vincent was soon free.

Again he owed his deepest gratitude to Hector, and he felt that the words of praise he bestowed upon that noble animal were but weak. The dog seemed satisfied, however.

Examination showed that, though Hodge had received marks he would always carry, he was not dead or likely to die.

Vincent had no time to devote to prosecuting him when matters of so much greater importance demanded his attention. He left the fellow where he lay, and, again accompanied by Hector, set out for Thornholm.

Exciting and perilous as the late scene had been, it soon almost faded from his mind. The future dwarfed the past.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ROLAND GETS INTO TROUBLE.

VINCENT made all possible haste during the remainder of his journey. If Edward Crapo's suspicions were aroused his prolonged absence would serve to strengthen the suspicion, and he was anxious that when the blow was struck it should be sudden and unexpected.

When he emerged from the wood he noticed that Hector had again disappeared, nor did his efforts prevail upon his dumb ally to make himself visible.

Hector had not forgotten the encounter at Black Acre, and did not intend to venture near Crapo.

Darkness had fallen by the time the detective reached the vicinity of the house, but, to his surprise, he found Veva outside.

"I was watching for you," she explained, hesitatingly.

"Is it not rash?" he asked, hurriedly. "Your father—"

"Believes me in my room, ill with a headache, and my door is locked. Oh! Mr. Vincent, it makes me so wretched to take such a course. All my life I have despised hypocrisy and deceit, and now I am treading the devious path. I can hardly believe I am myself, but, whatever I have done, all is due to—Mr. Crapo. I can—"

de ol' massa take ter huntin' ob late! In all de years he's been at Thornholm, I never knew him fer go out wid a gun, or on a hunt, until the last few days. Fack is, he neber, like anything like work. But, all ob a sudden, he's got a regular passion for it, sah."

The old negro did not suspect how interesting he had made his remarks.

"Are you sure they have gone hunting?" Vincent asked, with sudden uneasiness.

"Yes, sah; dey took guns an' de big hounds, an' off dey went, bright an' early."

"Which way?"

"Down dar!"

The negro leveled his hoe, and it bore upon the southeastern swamp. If Vincent had drawn a line to the Norcross cottage, he could not have made it more correct than the one thus described by chance.

The detective was startled. He knew very well that Edward Crapo had not gone to seek ordinary game, and there was only one theory to be inferred from the "hunt" of a man who cared nothing for the pleasures of the chase.

Vincent's friends were menaced! He knew not whether it was his mother or sister, or both, but, in fancy, he saw the evil twain creeping upon the cottage weapons in their hands and murder in their hearts.

He did not linger with the old negro any longer, but, excusing himself, walked away. He went at moderate speed until he had put a grove between him and Thornholm, and then hastened along in the same way Crapo and Roland had taken.

He carried a pistol, and did not hesitate to defy the odds against him.

When he reached the swamp he let nothing turn him from his course, but kept on toward the cottage. It was no short journey, but it was made in time which outdid all of his previous efforts.

When he caught sight of the little building he swept an anxious glance around, and it was a sight most agreeable to his eyes when he beheld good old Captain Norcross sitting in the doorway, placidly smoking.

He crossed the clearing, and the ex-sailor waved his big brown hand.

"Aho, my boy! how goes it? Come to inquire about the good mother, I'll be sworn. Well, she's surprisingly well and strong, and our Nina is in having a regular woman's confab with her."

Crapo had not been there? Where was he?

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE DOUBLE SHOT IN THE SWAMP.

THE detective advanced with a lighter heart.

"So all is well, here?" he inquired.

"All's serene, my boy. Your mother surprises us all. Her mind is as clear as a bell, and, much to our surprise, she has none of the physical exhaustion which followed her first return to reason. She is sitting up, and, I verily believe, could well endure a jaunt out of doors. I've been thinking of giving her a ride in my boat."

"Has any one been here?"

"Nobody but the doctor."

"Have you seen any men prowling around?"

"Men? No. What men?"

Captain Norcross asked the question with sudden suspicion. He had been on the alert, and had loaded all of his weapons, but had seen no one.

"Crapo and Roland have gone on a hunt, so called," explained Vincent, "but I suspect that they are after human game. I fear they have learned who is in this cottage, and intend mischief—though, to be sure, they ought to have been here before, if my theory is correct. They've had time enough."

The ex-sailor's face had changed expression suddenly.

"I don't think they know what treasures this cottage holds. More likely, lad, they are searching for your mother in the swamp."

"That is quite likely."

"Since your mother's return to consciousness she has told of one thing which she remembers vaguely. I hesitate to reveal it to you, but it must be done."

"Go on, by all means."

"She thinks that she visited Thornholm—and, of course, she did, or she would not have had the papers—and was seen by Crapo. Be that as it may, he afterward came to her in a hut on a swamp knoll—beyond doubt, Black Acre—and, armed with a knife, tried to kill her. Of course she could not have resisted alone, but she had a defender there: the dog, Hector. He fought Crapo, beat him off, and put him to flight. But for that, your mother would have died by an assassin's hand!"

Vincent's eyes were flashing with anger, and it was some time before he could speak calmly, but, when he did, he realized what a debt of gratitude he owed to the Newfoundland.

"But the dog has disappeared," he added, "and may have been killed by Crapo."

"Hector is here," Norcross replied, smiling.

"Trust a dog for wisdom. Hector has gone

against Crapo, and he's not going to trust himself within the fellow's reach again."

"If I win the battle," asserted the detective, gratefully, "there is nothing too good at Thornholm for his use. He saved my life, as I well know, but his defense of my mother caps the climax. The noble animal shall receive all the care and favors that my ingenuity can invent, in the future."

The appearance of Nina interrupted them.

"The day and the hour are almost come!" she declared, unsteadily, when greetings were over.

"The day for us to strike?"

"Yes. Our mother is surprisingly strong, and she declares that there must be no unnecessary delay. She has advised that I go away, secure a carriage and horses, call upon such of her old friends as she can trust, and organize them to take part in the final blow."

"A wise plan."

"She thinks that the blow should fall tomorrow."

"So soon? She will not be able to go there."

"She says that she will."

"I shall be left alone," added Norcross; "I, and our Frenchman. By the way, he improves, too. He's asleep now, and it wouldn't surprise me to see him wake up with a brainy head on him."

"Captain," said Vincent, abruptly, "I think there are river-men near here who can be hired. Am I right?"

"There are plenty of them."

"I want three engaged at good pay, and have them stay here constantly until the danger is over."

"A good idea, my boy; a good idea!"

"How soon can you get them here?"

"In half an hour."

"Will you go at once?"

"Gladly! and I'll bring hearts of oak who can be neither bribed nor scared."

Norcross went away in his boat, and the detective entered the house to pass the intervening time.

He was agreeably surprised to see how well and strong his mother was, both physically and mentally; and he thought they had reason to believe the prophecy of Doctor Marston that there would be no recurrence of her malady.

She urged prompt action, and it was decided that Nina should go and try to enlist some of the legal Mrs. Crapo's old friends, so that the claimants would not have every one against them in the fight.

Norcross returned bringing three men who looked fully capable of defending the cottage and its inmates from hostile prowlers, and then the detective again turned his face toward Thornholm.

As he entered the wood he muttered:

"The time draws near. Veva will soon hate and despise me!"

It was not a happy mood for a prospective victor, but he was determined to shield her in every way possible; to give her money, home and sympathy, if she would accept them; and to do his utmost to lessen the force of the cruel blow she would receive when the legal Mrs. Crapo was shown to be living.

Vincent forgot that Crapo and Roland were on a death-hunt, and his homeward journey would have been one of mechanical motion, merely, had it not been for a sharp diversion midway.

The report suddenly broke upon the air of what seemed to be a heavily-charged gun, and then there was a heavy fall not far away.

At that point there was a heavy undergrowth of pine bushes, and Vincent had no clew to what had occurred, but he was strongly of the opinion that caution might not be out of place.

He remembered the hunters of human game.

He began to push his way cautiously through the undergrowth, but had gone only a few steps when he almost came face to face with Crapo and Roland. He let the bushes which he had parted swing quickly into position, to avoid discovery, but the other men were looking elsewhere.

They paused only a few feet away, and both gazed at something on the ground.

"What's up?" Roland demanded.

"I'm a dead man!" mumbled an unseen speaker.

"Did your gun go off by accident?"

"My gun didn't do it."

"Whose did?"

There was a pause, and Vincent again parted the bushes, in order to get a better view. On the ground lay a man whom he at once recognized as Drake Hodge, the swamp outlaw. The latter was hesitating, but he finally answered:

"Go look by the big tree yender, an' tell me w'ot yer find thar."

Roland walked to the point indicated, but quickly returned.

"You've lost your right bower," he answered.

"Black Tuck is over there, dead as a stone!"

Hodge groaned dismally.

"I thought so!"

"Did you fight?"

"'Twas an accident."

"How did it happen?"

The outlaw looked at the questioner, moved

his hand feebly toward a knife which lay near him, and then allowed the nerveless hand to fall.

"No use!" he muttered, hoarsely. "I'm dono fur, an' I'll soon foller Black Tuck. Thar won't be so much truck stole around hyar, fur me an' Blackey is done with it now. We was a-stillin' fur game, an' in the bushes we each mistook t'other fur the game. We fired. I killed poor Blackey dead, an' he give me my death-burt. I wish we had hit our game!"

The outlaw turned his dim eyes upon Roland.

"What was the game?" the planter asked.

"It was you!" Hodge declared. "Blackey an' me had sworn to kill two men we hated—Walter Vincent an' you. He licked us, an' you set the dogs on us at Black Acre. Hev you forgot that? We never forgot it, an' we swore ter fix ye fur it. We seen yer, a bit ago, in the swamp, an' still-hunted yer, but we made a horrible mistake, an' now—I'm goin' with Blackey!"

The ruffian's voice had sunk to a feeble whisper, and, at the last words, he settled back and yielded up his life. He had, indeed, gone to re-join Black Tuck.

"A good job!" declared Edward Crapo. "Two first-class scoundrels have killed each other, and the world is the better off for the job."

"Zounds! what if they had got a crack at me?" returned Roland, nervously.

"I only wish they had done so at the other man Hodge says they bated—Vincent."

"What's up between him and you?"

"We have had no quarrel."

"You are afraid of him."

"Afraid!" echoed Crapo. "Well, perhaps I am; but, if so, you have just as much cause to dread what he may do."

"Why?"

"He's dangerous."

"Then wind him up!" Roland exclaimed.

"By my life, I'm not in favor of letting any man lope about who can do us harm. If Vincent is of that class, put a stopper on him. The life of a hired man shall not stand between us and safety; I'll hold Thornholm, if I have to remove a dozen secretaries!"

"That's well spoken," agreed Crapo, approvingly, "and I'll take you at your word. Tomorrow we will make a final search for the strangely-missing mad-woman; then we will pay attention to Vincent. Come on! Leave these outlaws where they are; I want to get back home."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A REMARKABLE DISCOVERY.

CRAPO and Roland resumed their journey, little suspecting that the object of their murderous plans had overheard all that they said.

Vincent was not greatly surprised, but the conversation showed that he and his mother were wise to take action in the case as soon as possible. Both of the plotters had shown themselves desperate men to whom human life was in no degree sacred, and time was alone needed to enable them to carry out some of their plans, though it was clear that the ex-mad-woman's present whereabouts was unknown to them.

Anxious to avert fresh suspicion, the detective made a detour and, by rapid walking, arrived at Thornholm ahead of them.

Neither made any attempt to hold conversation with him during the remainder of the day, and his watchful caution during the night did not bring to light any attempt to invade his room.

The next morning the secretary smiled grimly as he saw Crapo and Roland again go to the swamp—to hunt!

The forenoon bade fair to be one of idle in consequence, and, finally, he decided to go for a walk about the grounds. He had reached the door of his room, and was just going into the hall, when he saw the second Mrs. Crapo come out of the old portrait-room. A sight so unexpected caused him to stop short.

The lady was speaking to the negress who accompanied her.

"A miserable old den, and the sooner it is done away with the better. It is a shame to have such a desirable room unused. It shall be remodeled and used as a sleeping-chamber."

"But what will be done with the family portraits?" asked the negress, deeply troubled.

"They can be packed away in the garret."

"Oh! you wouldn't do that!"

"Why not?"

"They are the portraits of the Thornholms—"

"What of it? Such rubbish is not valued now, and the dead Thornholms will never know the difference. Roland can have his mother's picture in his own room, if he wishes—which I doubt—but the rest of the trash goes to the garret. Or, perhaps, an unused shanty in the negro quarters would make a still better place for them!"

And Mrs. Alice Crapo swept away in a mood of supreme self-satisfaction, not even seeing Vincent.

The latter was glad that he had overheard this conversation. He had before known the woman's evil nature too well to pity her greatly, but the last incident had served to steel his heart against her. She must suffer with the rest.

The secretary quietly left the house. Having no definite object in view, he walked on aimlessly until he found himself near the negro quarters. Then he remembered Phillis, the aged negress who had taken such a strong fancy to him, and to whose humble home he had frequently gone since his residence at Thornholm.

Entering, he was greeted by her with her usual exhibition of pleasure. From the first she had been able to trace the Thornholm characteristics in his bold face, and as the impression deepened at each succeeding interview, it seemed at times as if the father of the lost Rosalind was back by her side, restored to life and youth.

Several minutes were passed in conversation, and then they were interrupted by the entrance of Veva.

"I did not expect to see you, Mr. Vincent," she observed, when greetings were over, "but it will make no difference; I am about to tell Aunt Phillis what you know already."

"Is there news, chile?" the aged woman asked, eagerly. "If dar is, let me hear it, fur suah!"

"There is news, Aunt Phillis," Veva replied, as she sat down and rested her own white hand on the dark, wrinkled hand of her old friend. "I am going to leave Thornholm."

Phillis's face was a panorama. Surprise and alarm were at first visible, and then as her active mind caught at threads of evidence she looked shrewdly at Vincent and then back to Veva.

"You's gwine ter be married, chile!" she declared.

Her inference had been so plainly expressed that Veva's face flushed for a moment, but the color was of but transient duration.

"No," she explained, gravely; "I leave to avoid being driven into a marriage."

"Driven!" cried Phillis, in excitement. "Who dar's ter try an' drive you?"

"Mr. Crapo has selected a man he wishes me to marry—one of wealth and worldly position—and he declares that if I do not obey him, I must leave Thornholm. I shall forestall his plans and leave without his knowledge."

"Do they dar' ter do this? Do they— Who is de man?"

"John Jay Lennox."

"Him? Why, chile, he isn't fit ter be your servant; he ain't! I knowed him when he was a boy. Miss Veva, you's gwine ter do jes' right; you run away! But hab you any money? Dot am de fo'most question."

"I have some, and can earn more. I am strong and of good courage."

"So you be; strong as a heroine in your own mind; but jes' you listen to de ol' woman. De world am a hard companion widout you have money, an' de moah you have, de better. Now, I's got fifteen dollahs saved up against a time ob distress, an' de time has come. Bress de Lord! dat I kin use it fur my chile! Miss Veva, you shall hab de money, an' I only wish it was moah; you shall hab it all!"

Phillis spoke fervently, her wrinkled face aglow with zeal and tenderness, and Vincent could hardly keep back his words of gratitude.

But Veva's eyes filled with tears.

"Oh! Phillis, you are kind, and good, and noble!" the girl declared, tremulously, "but I cannot take your little savings. Keep it, my dear friend, for I shall do very well."

"Very well," when you's driven out into de wide world?"

"I hope to conquer the world; I must!"

"But don't you go. You stay, an' assert your rights—"

"There can be no peace for me here, Phillis."

"Massa Crapo ought to be ashamed to ask you to marry a man you— But what's he got ter do wid de matter, anyhow? He ain't yer father!"

"Not my father?"

"Not her father?"

Veva and the secretary spoke almost together, but, while the former showed more doubt than surprise, Walter Vincent first stood amazed and startled, and then took a few long steps and grasped Phillis's arm.

"What did you say?" he demanded. "Am I mad? Are you— Phillis, speak plainly. Do you say that Veva is not Edward Crapo's daughter?"

"I do say so, an' I mean it. Not a drop ob his blood flows in her veins! She, a Crapo? No, sah!"

Phillis spoke with emphasis, but Vincent was so confused that it was Veva who asked the next question.

"Then, in mercy's name, who am I?"

"You's de niece ob Crapo's present wife, but yer own parents died when you's a baby. Dat's who you be, and Edward Crapo has no right ter say who you shall o' sha'n't marry."

Walter Vincent's face was radiant with joy. He felt that Phillis had told the truth, and it was the happiest moment of his life. There was no bond of relationship between Veva and himself, and, consequently, no barrier to their bond of affection.

He looked at Veva with an expression which would have puzzled her, had she seen it, but, thoroughly bewildered, her whole attention was upon Phillis.

"I don't understand," she admitted. "This is a strange story. Tell me all that you know."

"I know de whole affair. Mrs. Crapo had a sister whose name was Mildred, and she married de captain ob a New York vessel—de sisters was both poor, then, an' Alice would hab been glad to make as good a match as Mildred did. Now comes de important part:

"Sixteen years ago—yes; it am jes' sixteen—Alice passed de summer in Pennsylvania. She was Massa Crapo's wife, den, you know, an' I was dar to do de work. Well, chile, dat summer, in July, dar was a collusion ob two vessels, which means dey run togelder; an' your father was killed, an' your mammy 'most so."

"Poor Miss Mildred! She had jes' strength enough left ter come to Miss Alice with her baby—dat was you, honey—an' ask her sister ter take it an' care for it."

"Miss Alice is cold as an iceberg now, but she loved her sister, an' she vowed de chile should be brought up as her own. Miss Mildred died a-blessing her an' you, chile, an' so it was dat you come into de family!"

"You are sure of this?" Vincent questioned, abruptly.

"Jes' as sure as dat we-uns are alibe, now, an' it kin be proved by felks in Pennsylvania; but nobody here has ever knowed it but me an' my daughter—she's dead, now—for we was de only ones that went wid Miss Alice, an' de only ones who could say she did not become a mother, dat summer. Dat am de truth, an' Miss Alice an' Massa Crapo hab nevah had a single chile!"

There seemed no longer to be room for doubt, and Veva, glancing at Vincent, was surprised to see the look of great joy on his face.

Little suspecting the vast load which had been lifted from his mind, and little suspecting how gloriously bright the future suddenly seemed to him, he could not understand why the revelation should affect him so much.

"Now, doan' you tell me, Miss Veva," Phillis tearfully added, "dat my chile is to leave Thornholm neber again to see old black aunty."

Vincent calmed himself with a great effort.

"What you have told simplifies matters greatly, Phillis," he answered, "and I think no long parting will be necessary. Let it rest with that. Miss Crapo, please say good-by, now; I wish to see you outside."

Veva bade the aged woman an affectionate farewell, and then went with her protector.

She supposed that he wished to add something in regard to the plans for her departure, and all her thoughts were of the story she had heard. Her movements were mechanical as Vincent conducted her to a seat in the grounds.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"THE FOE!—THEY COME!"

WALTER VINCENT had been thinking rapidly since the aged colored woman's revelation. That revelation had changed the whole current of his life. Now, indeed, could he force his claim at Thornholm with a firm and steady hand; the downfall of the present occupants would bring no stain upon Veva, and, he suspected, but little sorrow.

Between them there was no longer a barrier; light had come where all had been dark; and, with no further cause for concealment, he was resolved to speak plainly.

Looking at Veva, then, his emotions almost overcame him.

How good, and noble, and beautiful she was!

As yet she had seen no great change in his manner. She was so busily thinking of what they had heard that she forgot all else. Not Edward Crapo's daughter, but an orphan—alone in the world!

It was a thought which brought a shadow to her mind, and a ray of sunshine which struggled through the tree-top fell upon a face as sweetly serious as the Madonna's.

"Miss Veva," observed the secretary, gravely, "in view of recent developments, I wish to say that you are not to be left friendless. I promise that the heart of my sister shall be open to you; that she will love and protect you; that all my friends shall be yours."

"You are very kind, and I shall not forget it," she responded, unsteadily. "I really think, though, that I had better go to Washington at once. If I stop at your home, I fear it will be a kindness I can never repay."

"On the contrary, you can repay me a thousandfold. You say I have been kind, and that you will not forget it. To me, Veva, that is a great reward, but—I dare to ask for more—for yourself! I ask you to share my home forever—my fortunes, my life, my love! Veva, I think you understand, and, as words can but feebly express my feelings, let all be contained in one question: Will you be my wife?"

The eventful words were said, and, with their utterance, the young couple may as well be left alone. Just what was said, further, concerns no one so much as themselves.

Enough that Veva's reply was all that Vincent could hope for, and that their conversation and minds ran in one and the same channel.

The cloud was removed from the secretary's life, and, with matters assuming such an aspect, it looked as though Veva would not long remain away from Thornholm Lodge.

Yet Vincent did not tell her all, and she little suspected that, in the mansion she was preparing to leave forever, she might yet reign as mistress.

In the midst of their conversation a sharp-faced negro had approached from the direction of the swamp bearing a note, which proved to be for Vincent.

Tearing it open he read quickly, and then abruptly rose to his feet.

It was from Nina, and contained the glad news that her mother had regained additional strength, and was feeling much better than before in every way.

The closing paragraph was significant:

"It is her will that the blow fall without delay. Come to us at once."

For a moment Vincent hesitated, and then turned to Veva.

"The note is from my sister, and I must lose no time in going to her. Suppose, Veva, that something should occur so that those who now rule Thornholm should be deprived of their possessions, and that the estate should go to some one else—friends of mine—would it bring you regret?"

"Your friends are mine, Walter; what pleases you will please me."

"Answered like your noble self. Now one thing more: Will you keep all that has occurred a secret?"

"Gladly!"

"It would be rash to let any one know of your great discovery."

"No one shall know of it."

"Enough!"

They said good-by and separated. He hastened away toward the swamp and Norcross cottage. He left her too much agitated to go in at once, but, after a short time, she sought the house without bearing signs of any unusual emotion.

Edward Crapo and Roland returned soon after, but their weary and disappointed manner told plainly of ill luck.

The latter went to his room immediately, but Crapo sought his usual resort, the library.

As he dropped into an easy-chair his hand touched his favorite book, the *Life of Napoleon*, but he tossed it aside impatiently. His mind was too perturbed to dwell even upon that comforter. Having failed to find any trace of the mad-woman, he must necessarily invent new plans for safety.

He grappled with the problem, but not with his old determination. A stupefying weight seemed to be upon him. There was more than physical weariness, and he found it impossible to rally.

Time passed.

Twice he arose and paced the room, but without result. His contracted brows never relaxed; he did not get the solution to the enigma.

The road of safety did not appear.

On the shelf the hands of the old clock were marching on. There was motion elsewhere, as he was doomed to learn before many hours passed.

The door finally opened without any warning, and a lady and gentleman entered. The latter came first and Crapo frowned as he saw the secretary, but the lady who followed—

Edward Crapo started up, and then sunk back into the chair.

The mad-woman had reappeared in new form; this quiet, gentle-faced, gray-haired old lady in black silk was very unlike the wretched inhabitant of the Black Acre hut—yet they were one and the same.

"Mr. Crapo," coldly pronounced Vincent, "let me introduce to you your wife, Mrs. Crapo!"

Consternation filled the evil-doer's mind. Too well he recognized the lady, and her presence with Vincent proved that the latter was what the elder man had feared.

The edifice of twenty years was crumbling around Crapo's head, but the very danger served to bring back his iron will. He thought of the pistol in his pocket, but, too wise to invite death on the gallows, he turned to other ways of defiance, if not of relief.

He arose with splendid courage, and stood with a front of icy dignity.

"Sir," he returned, "this intrusion, and your preposterous words, require an explanation."

"You shall not be denied one."

Vincent spoke with inimitable composure, and, standing there, face to face—father and son—it was plain that, much as they differed in certain ways, they were alike in strong, powerful minds.

"Proceed, sir!" was the curt reply.

The young man led his mother to a seat. She was strangely calm, but her respect for her husband had died years before, and in the new pride, love and confidence felt for her son she found the strength she needed.

"I am now ready to talk," pursued Vincent. "I have presented this lady as Mrs. Crapo. She is your only lawful wife, and Robert Allan Thornholm's daughter."

"Preposterous!"

"You find it hard to receive the wife you left, deserted, ill and penniless, among strangers."

"She seems to have prospered."

"No thanks are due you. At this late time of life, Mr. Crapo, you have to learn that it is dangerous to trust delicate work to others. Alarmed by the fever, you fled to Savannah. From there you deigned to write a letter asking whether your wife had lived or died. You received certificates of death and believed, wherein you were foolish. Instead of decreasing, one frail and feeble life was added to your family in that hospital; Mrs. Crapo became the mother of an infant daughter!"

"Plainly, your talent lies in romancing."

"You will find me practical enough."

"Pray, why should the hospital people send a bogus certificate of death?"

"The yellow fever had created hopeless confusion. In that crisis one person's identity was confused with another."

"Elaborately explained!"

"And truthfully, as I will yet prove."

The men looked each other in the face, strong, firm, thoroughly hostile, yet without any sign of emotion. Each recognized "a foeman worthy of his steel," and the battle was stubbornly contested.

The natural firmness of Vincent's nature had been perfected by detective experience, and he was able to meet Crapo without a tremor.

The latter shrugged his shoulders.

"Proceed," he directed.

"Your deserted wife has come to claim her own."

"Sir, I do not know what impulse leads me to sit here and listen to your insolence, instead of calling a servant to eject you. Are you mad? Rosalind Thornholm Crapo died a score of years ago—died as you say I wrongly thought she did—in Cuba. It is an insult to me to put forward this—this lady—a cold sneer—as that unfortunate woman. Perhaps I may be allowed to ask who it is that is aiding her claim?—referring to yourself."

For a moment Vincent hesitated to make the claim. Such a father was not to his liking. Yet, his reply was firm!

"I am Roland Thornholm Crapo, your son!"

"If I remember correctly, there is already one young man of that name before the public."

"There is but one genuine, and I am he."

Perhaps you will tell me upon what you base your preposterous claim?"

"You shall hear upon what I base my just claim."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A NECESSARY WITNESS APPEARS.

THE detective glanced at his mother anxiously. Her calmness reassured him, and he returned to the attack with fresh strength.

In clear, concise terms he gave the story of the past.

He told of the arrival of the Crapos in Cuba; of the prevalence of the yellow fever and illness of Mrs. Crapo and the boy, Roland; of their desertion by both Crapo and Maggie Warner; of the birth in the hospital of Mrs. Crapo's daughter; and how, subsequently, the mother had risen in delirium, left the hospital and wandered away, supposed by all to be another victim of the ocean.

Next, he told of the two children left among strangers, helpless, friendless and nameless—the last fact due to the same confusion which had led to the sending of the incorrect certificate of death—and how the children were seen, adopted and reared by honest Captain Norcross and his wife.

Finally he told of the return of Maggie Warner to Virginia and the revelations which followed; of his own visit to Cuba, and the subsequent events already clear to the reader.

Edward Crapo did not lose his calmness for a moment; as long as they were unable to prove who the reigning Roland was, they might not be able to prove that he was not the genuine Thornholm.

"You have woven a very pretty web, sir," he answered, steadily, "but it will avail nothing. If persevered in, it will send you to prison for blackmail. Madam," turning to his wife, "you have a somewhat refined face. Let me ask in all seriousness how you can lend yourself to a scheme so dastardly?"

Mrs. Crapo turned her gaze upon her son and grew strong.

"All things are possible," she returned, with scarcely a tremor, "else I would not believe you so evil. As for me, I only desire my rights."

"You are wondrous dramatic!" sneered Crapo.

"Another great actress lost to the stage!"

"And another Nemesis found for you," retorted Vincent.

The gaze of father and son again met. The former was in an inward fury. He felt that his was a losing cause, and only his great strength of will kept him up.

He had to meet enemies better equipped than himself, and one, at least, was as firm.

Crapo studied his wife's face.

He wondered if she had any recollection of her visit to Thornholm on the occasion when she secured the papers, or of the subsequent scene in the hut. If the latter was remembered, the fact that he had drawn his knife upon her would make the case go hard with him.

"What do you demand?" he asked, abruptly, again looking at the detective.

"That you acknowledge your lawful wife and son."

"And what of—of my present wife?"

"I am sorry for her, but she must of necessity bow to her fate."

The secretary did pity the woman who had so dreary a life ahead of her, despite the fact that, during his stay at Thornholm, she had never vouchsafed him more than a haughty bow.

"And what of myself?"

"You will be arrested for attempting to murder my mother in the swamp hut."

Crapo could not avoid a start, and Vincent, who was sharply watching, smiled gravely.

"I am willing to compromise with you," confessed Crapo.

"Compromise!" echoed Vincent, with sarcasm.

"You are infatuated with Veva. Let me go free, and I will tell you that which will remove the barrier between you."

"You mean you will confess that, instead of being your daughter, she is only your second wife's niece."

Crapo could not repress a muttered curse. Was he to be beaten at all points?

"You speak of a compromise," added Vincent.

"Do you, then, admit that you see before you your legal wife and son?"

"Never!"

"Think again!"

"I say it is false, you scoundrel!"

"Be calm!"

"Ay, that I will; I'll call the slaves and have you ejected. This insolence has gone far enough."

Crapo arose, but the secretary put out his hand.

"Wait!" he directed, authoritatively.

The elder man paused, held by a will which, at that moment, was stronger than his own.

"For the last time," deeply added Vincent, "do you acknowledge the justice of our claim?"

Crapo grew pale with anger and fear.

"Once and for all, I defy you!" he hissed.

"Enough! I will spare you the trouble of calling your servitors."

Speaking quickly, he went to the door and opened it slightly. Two powerful men entered, and walked directly toward Crapo. He read their character at a glance, but faced them with wonderful courage.

The crisis had come, and again he rose superior to all weakness.

"Edward Crapo," uttered one, "you are our prisoner! We arrest you on the charge of assault with intent to kill!"

For an instant the gaze of the accused turned upon his wife; then he folded his arms across his breast.

"I am a Virginian," he said, slowly and deeply, "and I stand within my own home. Beware how you trouble me!"

Villain that he was, his stand was grand, but he was not allowed to make capital out of it.

The secretary-detective had not left the door, and he now threw it wide open and spoke one word:

"Enter!"

What followed was amazing. First came Livingstone and the elder Wallingford, two of the best-known planters of Virginia, and, close behind them, other persons of good repute; and then entered certain others well known to the reader.

There was he who had been known as Roland Thornholm, walking between two men and held by handcuffs; Captains Hereford and Norcross; Veva, Berenice, Nina and Maggie Warner; and there were others who need not be named, some of whom looked greatly surprised and none too well pleased.

Veva was radiant. Berenice, having an inkling of the truth, rejoiced for her friend, but, once, her gaze wandered to Hereford and her lips quivered.

Time had not removed the barrier between them, and she was wretched.

The captain's expression did not indicate that he was any happier than Miss Royalston.

Crapo was glaring defiance at the whole crowd, but reduced to silence by the unexpected blow. Again Vincent addressed him:

"We will now resume. You have defied me to prove my claim, even when I showed you clear proof on every point save one. That will now receive attention; I will prove where you obtained the boy you palmed off as Roland Thornholm!"

Perspiration broke out on Crapo's forehead.

"I protest against this infamous act!" he cried.

"You can combat the evidence later."

"But I will not submit—"

The muscular man by his side touched his shoulder.

"Easy, sir!" he continued. "The law reigns here!"

A man, black-haired, black-eyed and pale-faced, entered, walking between two other men. His step was slow, but his eyes gleamed brightly.

Roland grew deathly pale, and only a great

effort enabled him to bear up at all. He recognized the same man he had seen at the Norcross cottage, and no one knew better than himself what that meant to him. He was in deadly peril, and he had not the strong will and lion courage of Edward Crapo to meet it.

The latter was looking doubtfully, searchingly at the new-comer. Vincent broke the silence. Pointing to Crapo, he directed:

"Tell what you know about this man!"

He of the black eyes shrugged his shoulders.

"My name is Jean Aubrey, and I am a native of France," he explained; "but I've been a rolling stone, and have gone over nearly the whole world. Twenty years ago I was in Savannah, Georgia, working the place as a street-singer. I had been—well, I had lived by my wits—but when Lacour, my partner, died, I had a new idea.

"I adopted his son, Basil, and went around the streets, feigning lameness, with the two-year old child with me. It was a good trick, and I made money."

"One evening I was stopped by a man who, after some talk, offered me five hundred dollars if I would let him have the child and never see it again. I agreed; the money was paid; I surrendered all claim; he went away with his purchase."

"Yet, I did not intend to lose sight of the child—oh! no. I had made certain promises and meant to keep them, but it would do no harm to follow this fine gentleman and see who he was."

"I did follow, secretly, of course, and learned that his name was Edward Crapo, and learned that he was putting forward the child bought of me as a great heir."

"I shrugged my shoulders, said nothing, and went away. I held a great secret, but I have never asked my fine gentleman for a dollar, since."

He paused, and Vincent steadily asked:

"Will you swear to what you say?"

"I will. Yes, my ladies and gentlemen, he whom you have known, here, as Roland Thornholm, is, really, Basil Lacour!"

"It is a statement I cannot doubt," gravely added Livingstone. "The proof seems irrefragable."

Vincent turned to Crapo.

"What have you to say, sir?"

Without hesitation came the reply:

"When this matter reaches a court of law I will speak; until then, I am silent!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE FRENCHMAN SPEAKS TO GOOD PURPOSE.

THE fallen student of Napoleon spoke with icy calmness; even in his adversity he faced the foe firmly.

"Here's somebody who may have a word to say," sneered Jean Aubrey, pointing to Roland. "Bring him forward!"

No one opposed his will, and Roland was led to the center of the group, pale and trembling. All eyes were fixed on him who had so long ruled at Thornholm, with whom most of them had eaten and drank; and as few knew any real crime against him, he had the sympathy of the majority.

Hard, indeed, it seemed to be torn in one luckless hour from a proud position and cast to an ignoble depth.

Berenice Royalston, however, blessed the chance which had made her discard him in his time of power, and so saved herself from accusations of selfishness.

"This is Basil Lacour, alias Roland Thornholm," added Jean, grimly. "Waste no pity on him until you hear me out. I arrived in Virginia a month ago, from a cruise to India and back. I landed without money, and though, as I lately stated with truth, I had never asked Edward Crapo for money, I was resolved to seek my fine gentleman and fill my pockets."

"Being skillful at cards, I soon won enough to bring me here. One night I stopped at the Glenville hotel. Several young 'blooms' were there, and during the evening they began to play cards. I managed to join them, and chance so ordered it that I won several thousand dollars from a certain fellow who played with more recklessness than skill."

"It was not until the end of the game that I learned his name; then I found I'd been playing with the so-called Roland Thornholm! Truly, I had made the family coffers open wide at the very start."

Thus far Roland had listened in silence, but seeing himself driven to the wall, desperation gave him strength.

"It is a base falsehood!" he cried. "I never saw this man before!"

One of the guests stepped forward.

"I am sorry to say that I saw Roland and the Frenchman playing, as the latter has said," he gravely asserted.

A look of despair came to the fallen man's face.

"Are you all against me?" he demanded, sbrilly. "Have I no friend here?"

Edward Crapo shrugged his shoulders and turned partially away. The loss of courage disgusted him.

Roland remained silent, and Jean continued: "The playing ended in trouble. Thornholm accused me of cheating—which, of course, I did not do—and dashed his cards in my face. In a moment I had a knife at his breast, and on his bended knees he begged for pardon and mercy—a bit of by-play not observed by any one, but which, of course, ended our playing.

"I went out to get the air, and my pocketful of money elated me so much that I resolved to walk to Thornholm Lodge, as an exercise, and see the place by evening.

"It was not late, and I started. You all know that the road runs through a wood. While in that wood I had an adventure.

"I had no sooner left on foot than Thornholm left by saddle. Stung by the way I'd humbled him, if not by his money loss, he determined to see me again. He took the west road and went madly until he had ridden around me and gained my very path—at least, so I surmise his movements. What followed is not guesswork.

"The wood was dark except where the moonlight fell through the half-interlocked trees, but I was going along without a thought of danger when, suddenly, a man sprung out of the bushes and jumped at my throat.

"Good people, I can swear I recognized Roland Thornholm; I swear it by all that is sacred. I saw, too, the knife which gleamed in his hand, but I was so taken by surprise that I could not lift a hand until the steel had once done its work. It pierced my side.

"Then we grappled, but it was an unequal struggle; the blood was coming from my side like water. I grew weak; my head swam; and I lost consciousness.

"I was for the time being dead to the world, and it is a wonder that I did not leave it forever on that fatal evening—the tenth of last month!"

A deep breath rose from the hearers. Jean's manner was intensely dramatic, and it was a relief when he paused.

Every gaze was bent upon Roland, and then he again found speech. Pale and trembling, he poured forth threats against Jean and protestations of innocence in rapid succession until the officers felt compelled to quiet him.

Sick with horror, Veva turned to Berenice. She expected to find her friend as brave and strong as usual, but the pallor of death was not much whiter than Miss Royalston's face.

"Berenice! Berenice!" Veva exclaimed, in dismay.

Her words broke the spell; Berenice started, and the color swept back to her face in a sudden flood.

"Oh! may heaven be praised!" she uttered, so deeply, so thankfully, so strangely that Veva was for the time rendered speechless.

Jean Aubrey resumed in an unmoved voice, and told what had occurred after he lost consciousness.

It was clear that, thinking he had killed his opponent, Roland threw him into the river, which there flowed close to the road; but he had fallen upon some driftwood, which had buoyed him up until Captain Norcross found and took him to the cottage.

Subsequent events there, together with the visit by Roland when he saw Jean and thought him a specter, need no explanation here.

It will also be understood that, when Vincent was fully ready to strike the blow, he had seen the officers of law, and other persons who had come with him to Thornholm on the present occasion, and arranged a scene which should be at once overwhelming to the enemy and convincing to the best people of the neighborhood.

The officers had grown weary of delay, and they prepared to depart with Crapo and the false Roland as their prisoners. The latter was thoroughly cowed, but Edward Crapo looked on with a satirical smile on his strong face.

The guests did not go yet, and, in the momentary confusion, Berenice went to Hereford's side. He regarded her with grave kindness, and then, as he saw her quivering lips, thought bitterly that she still loved Roland.

"Captain," she said, unsteadily, "I have done you a great wrong!"

He started. "A wrong? No, no, not that; you did what you thought best—"

She interrupted him with a gesture. "You will remember that I told you there was something in the past which—which—must make us mere acquaintances, and that I refused to say what it was?"

"Yes," he quickly, eagerly returned.

"Oh! Arthur, I am ashamed to confess the truth—ashamed to look in your face. I have wronged you unpardonably!"

"I am not so sure of that."

"But I have."

"Will you let me be the judge? Will you tell me now?"

Her head sunk lower yet.

"Arthur, I—I witnessed the assault upon Aubrey!"

"You?"

"Yes; and, oh! Arthur, I thought the assailant was you!"

Hereford was silent through confusion.

"I thought I recognized you," she humbly added, "and did not see how impossible it was.

This was the obstacle between us; this, my unpardonable sin!"

"Unpardonable! Not so; you wrong me—"

"The wrong was in the past. Being so blind as not to see that you must be innocent, I decided that I could not unite my fortunes with an assassin. In that I was right, but, oh! why did I not understand I was fatally mistaken?"

Shame and misery were expressed in her face, but, after a moment of bewildered thought, his own expression grew strong with joy and hope.

"But now, now that you know me guiltless, is the ban lifted?" he eagerly asked.

In the confusion and murmur of voices no one but themselves heard the next few words, but, when they were spoken, Berenice knew she was fully forgiven, and the captain saw a golden future revealed to him.

Miss Royalston told how, returning on foot from a neighbor's, that evening, she had chanced to see Jean Aubrey stabbed and thrown into the river; how, thinking she had recognized Hereford in the slayer, she had gone home half-stunned and broken-hearted—gone home to think, think until her brain whirled—to believe the man whom she loved must have been driven to the deed by some great wrong, and to vow that, though she could not marry one who had taken human life, she would keep his secret forever.

Despite all, she had never been able fully to believe him guilty. In moments of calmness it seemed a positive fact; when with him she of ten wavered, and the judgment of her heart had led her to assert confidence in his honor, when talking with him, even while the cooler voice of her intellect pronounced her confidence false.

While they talked, Vincent and Veva were having a conversation not less earnest. Veva knew, at last, how painful had been his dilemma when he believed her Edward Crapo's daughter, and understood the complications that arose from that erroneous belief.

But they, like the other young couple, now saw only happiness in the future.

At one side Nina and Maggie Warner were tenderly caring for Mrs. Crapo, the Rosalind of other days; and the calm, tender light of happiness in her eyes spoke promisingly for her future.

When the guests had followed the prisoners out of the house the ex-deranged woman invited her young friends to visit the old portrait-gallery; the place where Vincent had gone, once, under such singular circumstances.

They were delayed for awhile as the negroes appeared in a body, led by old Phillis, who had not left her cabin before in several weeks; and then the older slaves kissed and dropped tears upon the hand of the "Miss Rosalind" who had so long been lost to them, and was now so strangely restored.

Later, she and her young friends went to the portrait hall and stood in a group amid the many pictured generations of the noble old family; and the eyes of Robert Allan Thornholm might almost have seemed to grow tender as they turned upon the living.

We leave them there, substance with shadow, generation with generation, but Thornholm, all; and the sunshine which streamed in through the western windows clad all in mantles of golden glory.

There was no legal struggle as a sequel to the events narrated, but the people of Glenville yet tell how, fearing to meet the charges brought against him of assaulting Aubrey, Basil Lacour, once known as Roland Thornholm, cheated the law by committing suicide.

Edward Crapo, released from prison because his wretched wife would make no complaint against him, took passage on a steamer bound for Europe. He never reached there; the vessel went down with all on board.

Of the second Mrs. Crapo and Jean Aubrey there is no further record. Both left Glenville abruptly, and were heard from no more. Rumor had it that they went together, but the report was not substantiated.

John Jay Lennox never entered Thornholm again. He married an heiress, and, as she was jealous and ill-tempered, led an unhappy life.

All went well with Captain Norcross, Maggie Warner and Phillis. All remained near their young friends. The captain and Hector, the dog, became great friends, and Norcross made it his special duty to see that Hector had a life as happy as the Thornholm family thought he deserved after his noble work; which meant nothing was too good for him.

Hereford and Berenice found no more trouble in deciding upon their future. They were married, and they settled down to a life of happiness. The last cloud had come and gone.

The tie between the neighbors was strengthened when Nina married a cousin of Hereford's. The lawful Mrs. Crapo had no return of her mental malady, but, beloved by all, bond and free, she lived in her old home in perfect happiness, tenderly cared for by her relatives.

"Dangerous Dave" was heard of no more in detective work. His last case had been his greatest and the victory had been complete, but he had no desire to continue the work.

He assumed the name of Robert Allan Thorn-

holm, at his mother's request, and reigned at the Lodge with Veva as his wife. In their opinion no other household was so happy as theirs, and the young Thornholms, who are proud to be their children, are as tenacious of the family honor as could be wished by the past generations who exist only in the old portrait hall.

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